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NEW MUNICIPALISM AS A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PROJECT FOR RADICALIZING DEMOCRACY

The case of Spain 2015-2019¹

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Abstract

Contemporary municipalism has emerged as a global drift and network, encompassing several cities in at least 19 countries in different continents. The present paper focusses on Spain, and particularly on the prominent case of Barcelona, where the citizen platform *Barcelona en Comú* has been governing the city since 2015 (to-date, 2021), led by Ada Colau. “Fearless cities” or “cities of change” have imagined themselves as a creative, democratic, agonistic and solidary response to our critical circumstances of steep inequalities, elite rule, reinvigorated patriarchy, aggravating social expulsions, climate change and civilization crisis.

The paper explores and assesses the transformative democratic force of new municipalism in the Spanish context of 2015-2019. It argues, among others, that in order to foster a “common” democracy whereby power flows from below, the autonomous political

1. Reception date: 29th January 2021; acceptance date: 12th March 2021. The essay is the issue of a research carried out within the Faculty of Law, Economy and Political Science, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

organization of municipalism should be nourished and fortified, and the real implication of ordinary citizens in fundamental decision-making should be broadened and deepened.

Keywords

Cities, democracy, new municipalism, Spain, democratic transformation, commoning.

Resumen

El municipalismo contemporáneo ha surgido como una deriva y una red global que abarca varias ciudades en al menos 19 países de diferentes continentes. El presente trabajo se centra en España, y en particular en el destacado caso de Barcelona, donde la plataforma ciudadana Barcelona en Comú gobierna la ciudad desde 2015 (hasta la fecha, 2021), liderada por Ada Colau. Las «ciudades sin miedo» o «ciudades del cambio» se han imaginado a sí mismas como una respuesta creativa, democrática, agonística y solidaria a nuestras circunstancias críticas de fuertes desigualdades, dominio de las élites, patriarcado revigorizado, expulsiones sociales agravadas, cambio climático y crisis civilizatoria.

El ensayo analiza, explora y evalúa la fuerza democrática transformadora del nuevo municipalismo en el contexto español de 2015-2019. Sostiene, entre otras cosas, que para fomentar una democracia “común” en la que el poder fluya desde abajo, la organización política autónoma del municipalismo debe ser alimentada y fortificada, y la implicación real de los ciudadanos de a pie en la toma de decisiones fundamentales debe ser ampliada y profundizada.

Palabras clave

Ciudades, democracia, nuevo municipalismo, España, transformación democrática, común.

Recognition of funding

This paper is part of the project *Heteropotlics. Refiguring the Common and the Political* that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement 724692).

Introduction

Today, as more than half of the world's human population are urban dwellers, cities and citizens have gained an increasing salience (Barber, 2013, p. 5). This stems also from the paramount role of information and knowledge in digitalized economies, as well as from tighter global interconnections, in which cities operate as key nodes. Cities have become chief command points in the global economy under the present neoliberal hegemony. They are central locations for finance, specialized services and the production of innovations (Barber, 2013, p. 66; Glaeser, 2012, p. 40).

In effect, global economic forces and processes of financialization, rentier capitalism, economies of dispossession and predatory practices have conquered urban spaces and the housing market. 'Practices of accumulation by dispossession, rental appropriations, by money-and profit-gouging, lie at the heart of many of the discontents...for the mass of the population' (Harvey, 2013, p. 129). Hence, cities across the globe have also become sites of political experiment and subjects of 'insurgent citizenship' against urbanizing capital (Harvey, 2013, pp. xii-xvii, 86, 129-130, 139-140). The rise of insurgent and self-organized citizens in central squares in Cairo, Madrid, Barcelona, Athens, New York, Istanbul and many other cities in 2011-2013 bears witness to the political potentials of urbanism. All in all, thus, cities today turn out to be central and striated 'critical junctions' of

multilevel relational mechanisms that link the global levels of structural power with the respective institutional fields of tactical power on the scale of the nation-state and with the spaces of agential power of common people situated in everyday circumstances. (Kalb, 2011, p. 13 quoted in Kalb & Mollona, 2018, p. 230)

In terms of their possibilities for empowering democratic agency, cities can enfranchise citizens to participate politically in local urban communities, while city administrations can liaise with one another on a global scale. Cities represent a level of government which is sufficiently local to allow for civic participation and to demand efficiency in problem-solving, while international city networks can work out cooperative solutions to global challenges. Climate change, for instance, can be effectively addressed in cities as 80% of carbon emissions are produced in urban sites (Barber, 2013, pp. 22-23, 102, 131, 153). Indeed, cities have committed themselves to meeting

the climate goals of the Paris Agreement, wielding a new form of global power (Katz & Nowak, 2017, p. 35).

The modern metropolis retrieves the capacity to empower neighborhoods and nurture civic engagement, but at the same time holds out the prospect of networked global integration: that is the promise of glocality. (Barber, 2013, p. 154)

In this context, contemporary municipalism has emerged as a global drift and network, encompassing several cities in at least 19 countries in different continents (Pisarello & Comisión Internacional, 2018, p. 10). The present paper will linger specifically with Spain, and particularly with the prominent case of Barcelona, where the citizen platform *Barcelona en Comú* has been governing the city since 2015 (to-date, 2021), led by Ada Colau. The wave of municipalist platforms and administrations which swept Spain in 2014-2015 stands out internationally as a signal instance of the global new municipalist movement, along with the Kurdish democratic confederalism (Roth, Monterde & López, 2019, p. 14). “Fearless cities” or “cities of change” have imagined themselves as a creative, democratic, agonistic and solidary response to our critical circumstances of steep inequalities, elite rule, reinvigorated patriarchy, aggravating social expulsions, climate change and civilization crisis (Herrero, 2018, p. 7; Colau, 2018, pp. 193-196; Roth, Monterde & López, 2019, p. 14).

The municipalist movement in action today: Municipal confluences in Spain

In the last decades, Spanish cities were converted into a motor of neoliberal “growth”, which was engineered by the construction industry and the real estate, the privatization of services and private-public partnerships. As a result, the crisis of this development model since 2007, notably the “housing bubble”, depleted their fiscal resources. Combined with austerity and the “free market” policies of the national government, which were enforced also on local administrations, the economic slump plunged cities deeply into debt. The depression devastated their social services. It drove city governments to sell out more public property, and it inhibited them from offering a social security net to their evicted and impoverished citizens (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014, pp. 96-99, 121-135, 140-141).

The same neoliberal growth model, pivoting around the ‘valorization’ of land and the construction business, bred political corruption. It spawned interlinked political-economic interests and local oligarchies, which pillaged the city and eroded democracy on the urban level. The corrosion of local democracy was further exacerbated by the centralizing reforms of the state, which shrank the political autonomy of city governments by imposing the marketization of public goods, by cutting back the cities’ budget and by curtailing their policy-making competences. At the same time, citizens were disaffected with the national institutional system, which proved corrupt and unresponsive to their needs. The two ruling parties -the social democratic PSOE and the right-wing PP- suffered massive losses of voters, and the crisis of political institutions set in (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014, pp. 99-109, 140-141).

Starting to rise in 2014 across different cities and localities in Spain, political municipalism walked in the footsteps of the 15M [«Indignados»] movement to confront these latest assaults on freedom and democracy in Spain, reclaiming the city as the heartland of citizens’ democracy. New municipalism aspired to overcome fear, social fragmentation, collective impotence, privatization, the hollowing-out of democracy, neoliberal austerity, and xenophobia, by constructing more social, feminist and sustainable cities (Aranzadi-Pamplona en Común, 2018, p. 204). By weaving relations of mutual support in everyday life, on the level of the city, through ‘proximity’ and ‘from below,’ the ‘cities of change’ could recover and reinvigorate democracy. They would garner power both inside and outside the institutions, while countering the reactions of ethnic and religious closure (Martínez, 2018, p. 23; Colau, 2018, p. 194).

“Winning back the city” is about much more than winning the local elections. It means putting a new, transparent and participatory model of local government, which is under citizen control, into practice. It also means implementing fair, redistributive and sustainable policies to respond to the economic and political crisis. Our strategy has been to start from below [...] (Barcelona en Comú, 2016, p. 4)

Engaging with city institutions was meant to be a component of a broader strategic approach to social innovation with two planks, the electoral-institutional and the organizational-movement (Russel, 2019, p. 10; Roth, 2019, p. 59). The movement aspired to refigure the ‘forms of doing politics,’ to recuperate the city and its institutions and to transform them through the power of the people in order to put them in the service of the common good. Local institutions should be rebuilt to become less hierarchical,

more transparent, and accountable, ruled by the collective decision-making of citizens. Civic participation should expand by including all citizens and by affording real opportunities for “presencial” or digital participation in quality decision-making. Collective decision should proceed on equal terms and should be flexibly adapted to the different availability of persons. The objective was to ‘hack’ and to remodel the governing infrastructures of the city to open their gates to the “common people” and, thereby, to “common” the city (Roth, Lander & Pin, 2018, pp. 114-116; Ubasart-González, 2018, p. 70).

The project of recovering citizens’ democracy is wedded to the broader libertarian objective to attain freedom from domination in its various guises –class, gender, ethnic and species. To this end, new municipalism speaks for a twin struggle on the streets and the institutions, in home and the workplace, through resistance and transformative politics (Herrero, 2018, pp. 5-71; Pisarello & Comisión Internacional, 2018).

The alternative politics of insurgent municipalism in Spain started out from a certain diagnosis of the political conjecture after the 15M movement, which appeared on stage on the 15th of May 2011 and set up encampments on central squares. 15M exacerbated the legitimation crisis of the ruling regime. It also diffused another democratic culture of popular participation, horizontalism and collective co-decision. But the movement failed to reshuffle the decks of power and to instigate “regime change”. Dominant institutions remained largely exclusionary and impervious to demands for popular sovereignty, a more equitable distribution of wealth and the protection of welfare rights and political liberties. Hence a turn from mobilizations to “the electoral”, which took a municipalist inflection in 2014-2015. The aim of the electoral turn was to reach out to all citizens affected by the crisis, to “win the city” and to translate the politics vindicated by civic spaces and activism into electoral majorities and local institutional policies (Baird, Delso & Zechner, 2018, p. 47; Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 14-15; Forti & Spena, 2019, pp. 21-22, 29).

In their swerve towards other patterns of political mobilization and (local) institutions from 2014 onwards, municipalist candidacies clung to the spirit of “real democracy” of the 2011 civic insurgencies. Both internally, in their own political agencies, and “externally” in the institutions they wished to reconstruct, they were keen on “doing politics in another way”: open assemblies, collective intelligence, horizontal and participatory decision-making by citizens, a distinct technopolitical infrastructure that shores up civic engagement, collective leadership, democracy in networks, open-source instruments and logics, consensus-seeking, ethical politics, the proliferation of the commons through a “municipalism of the common good”, transparent administration, and the

feminization of politics, which pursues gender parity, relations of care and attention to power structures. All these components yield the common breeding ground of diverse municipal platforms in Spain since 2015, bespeaking their common 15M political DNA. At the core of their vision sits a radical pragmatism, which is bent on concrete action, detailed feasible plans, and tangible results in everyday life. This radical pragmatism prioritizes “learning by doing” and “collective learning” over any abstract theory of change (Pérez, 2018, pp. 33-37; Forné, Micciarelli & Fresnillo, 2018, pp.141-145; Pisarello & Comision Internacional, 2018, pp. 9-11; Forti & Spena, 2019, pp. 27-29, 36, 39).

Plunging into the organizational core of municipalist politics in Spain from 2014 to date, this is located in the “municipalist platform” or “confluence”. Several formations of this kind were put together in 2014-2015 to contest the May 2015 local elections in several municipalities across Spain. Later, they were implicated in administration, as coalition or minority governments in five of the largest cities in Spain -Madrid, Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, Zaragoza and A Coruña (Monterde, 2019, pp. 29-34).

Confluences were alliances between converging political projects of parties, movements, civic groups, and non-organized citizens. They sought to become something beyond the sum of their parts, while respecting the identity of each member. They were grounded in common objectives and the endeavor to fashion a political environment where people without prior political engagement can feel at ease. They were designed thus as new instruments of social articulation and political intervention that could bring together those already organized and people beginning or willing to mobilize. Crucially, persons participated on an individual basis, not as representatives of their projects, and they could maintain a “double militancy”. Yet, shared commitments, expressed in a commonly agreed “code of ethics”, should take precedence over the distinct practices and policies of constituent members. And a strong accent was placed on the inclusion of people who were not activists or party members and did not have previous experience in political action (Junqué, Tepp & Ramas, 2018, pp. 72-73, 80; Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 14-15).

In practice, municipalist initiatives negotiated a delicate balancing act between assuming leadership and implementing a transparent, collective, and participatory process in decision-making and action. Hence, trade-offs between horizontality and leadership, impurity, generosity towards other participants, organizational flexibility and a practical mindset intent on concrete outcomes gave the predominant tenor to the organizational logics of new municipalist politics (Baird, Delso & Zechner, 2018, pp. 47-49; Junqué, Tepp & Ramas, 2018, pp. 72-74). More specifically, at the beginning, leadership was

assumed by a group of citizens and activists, which took the initiative to band together an electoral platform and to lay down the pillars of a political program, which would be further worked out through the open participation of other citizens. They also appointed a “pilot group” to set the process in motion and to work for the democratization of the organization once this had been consolidated. Then, the platform was presented in a public event, and it became “open source”. People in the city were invited to join the process of building further the platform and of elaborating a text of principles and commitments (Baird, Delso & Zechner, 2018, pp. 49-51; Junqué, Tepp & Ramas, 2018, pp. 72-74; Barcelona en Comú, 2016, p. 5).

Accordingly, a collective initiative led by a particular group was opened to a praxis of *commoning the municipalist project* through collective participation and collaboration. People who shared the main terms and objectives of the project were called upon to co-construct its contents and its further development. The municipalist initiative took the streets and the squares to reach out to the broader body of city residents, beyond movement activists and political parties. They spoke a plain, everyday language, relating to local cultures and employing art and memes to make politics more joyful in its communication with the body of citizens at large. Collaborative and participatory mechanisms were put in place to draw up collectively an electoral program, which would constitute a citizens’ mandate, and to select the candidates in ways which would reflect the diversity of the movement. Moreover, from the outset the members of the municipalist platform authored collectively a code of ethics, which would define the conduct of elected and appointed members of the platform, ensuring accountability, constant engagement with citizens, financial transparency, limited salaries, and privileges (Baird, Delso & Zechner, 2018, pp. 49-51; Barcelona en Comú, 2016, pp. 6-7).

The evolution of the first municipal confluences in 2015 followed thus a methodology of “five points”: the search for wide social support (through the collection of signatures etc.); a collaborative elaboration of the electoral program; open primaries for the selection of candidates; the adoption of a code of ethics which limits the privileges of elected representatives; and a campaign which was largely based on crowdfunding and did not accept funding from banks (Méndez, 2019).

This municipalism sponsored “citizens’ leadership”, that is, the rise of new faces who enjoy ample support among the members of the platform and contribute to its development in different capacities (as public spokespersons, technicians, leaders of the

communication group etc.) In its own structure, the municipalist confluence was committed to internal democracy, transparency, and the facilitation of political participation by all citizens. It was administered by a coordinating body, which consisted of representatives of all groups and spaces of the platform. The «coordinadora» contained no strong single-person posts (e.g., of a “general secretary”). Its members usually rotated on a regular basis, and it was subject to the highest authority, the whole community of the platform’s members. Furthermore, it reached strategic decisions about the platform or the city administration by holding binding consultations with all the members (Martínez & Baciero, 2019, p. 247).

To lift civic participation, the organizational model was place-based, anchoring the organization in localities, neighborhood assemblies and everyday life. Multiple spaces and modalities of participation and decision-making were introduced, both “presencial” and digital, so that more people could get involved as they can and wish, maximizing inclusion and participation. All decisions should be the outgrowth of collective debate, collaboration, and work in networks. General decisions were voted by all members through simple procedures. Finally, when the platform elected council members or entered the city government, both the institutional space (of the mayor, councillors etc.) and the municipal platform should be kept in place, collaborating, co-deciding, and reflecting on municipal policies. Enhanced civic participation in decision-making for the city should be the main objective in policymaking and campaigns. Elected representatives were bound by the “code of ethics”, which curtailed mandates and salaries, enforcing transparency (Junqué, Tepp & Ramas, 2018, pp. 72-75; Comú de Lleida, 2018, p. 217).

Crucially, the municipalist platform was supposed to operate as an autonomous political organization with its proper political project. It was not conceived by its initiators as a simple electoral list. Its presence in city halls through elected representatives –mayors and city councillors- should be coupled with the ongoing activity of an autonomous political agency, which interacts with social movements, neighborhoods, and citizens beyond the city administration itself. Hence, the municipal platform aspired to act as a space of encounter and intercourse between citizens, movements and institutions that re-educates their subjectivity and their ways of doing politics with a view to making citizens the political protagonists of democracy (Roth, 2019, pp. 61-63; Martínez & Baciero, 2019, p. 243).

The example of Barcelona en Comú

The complex texture of the municipal confluence Barcelona en Comú [Barcelona in Common] offers a telling illustration of such a hybrid and multi-tier scheme of organization, which pairs horizontal participation with centralized coordination. Barcelona en Comú was established in 2014 and won the local elections of May 2015, obtaining 25,2% of the vote and 11 councillors (Forti & Spina, 2019, pp. 45-47). In 2019, it came second with 20,71% and 10 seats, forming eventually a minority government. During its first term in office, this formation comprised «El Comú», which contained all registered members (15000) and constituted the ultimate collective body of decision-making, to which all others were accountable. It also consisted of self-managed, autonomous neighborhood groups brought together in a Territorial Coordinator; thematic axes formed by activists who were interested in particular issues (environment, gender, the social economy etc.); «El Plenari», which made the more strategic decisions and was composed of all activists who belonged to a neighborhood or working group (approximately 15000 persons); «La Coordinadora», which was staffed by people selected by all spaces of participation and a certain number of city councillors, and it was responsible for plotting the political strategy of the organization; «La Direcció Executiva», which included a reduced number of members elected by the activists. This executive body was charged with taking operative decisions and with executing the decisions reached by the Coordinadora (Junqué, Tepp & Ramas, 2018, pp. 75-76).

Beyond its internal organization, in its first term in city government, Barcelona en Comú rolled out a wide array of policies which implemented the new municipal agenda as laid out above and set in motion a commoning of politics and the city, more broadly.

To step up civic involvement in collective deliberation and decision-making, the government of *Barcelona en Comú* has launched the digital platform *Decidim Barcelona*. This is a signature project which highlights the imbrication of the ‘municipalism of change’ with radical democratic technopolitics. Decidim is an open access software and data platform, which has been designed collaboratively and can be taken up and modified by any other. It boosts civic participation by enabling citizens to submit proposals for the city and to collectively deliberate and decide on them. It provides data bases, instructions for facilitating processes, educational resources, and legal documents. It functions as a public forum for the co-design of city policies and for increasing transparency in administration and information. It has hosted collective processes with

thousand participants, and it supports both online and offline participation. People can make calls for offline meetings. Citizens can follow the development of their proposals and may decide to organize themselves to forward these proposals. Finally, it is itself a telling instance of a “public-common”. Decidim has been devised and funded by public institutions, but it is being designed, developed, and managed by an open community of associations, researchers, activists, etc. (Roth, Lander & Pin, 2018, pp. 116-117; Barandiaran, 2019, p. 193).

Citizens’ political empowerment was fostered through various other practices and mechanisms. People took part in the co-production of public policies, from their design to their implementation, through “Neighborhood Plans” and “multi-consultations”. Effective control over the administration was augmented by monitoring the ethical conduct of civil servants and by enhancing the transparency of financial administration, the execution of the budget etc. (Bonet i Martí, 2018, pp. 114-115).

Beyond the practices of government themselves, contemporary municipalisms nurture the commons and the commoning of public goods and services more broadly. Cities have devised institutional frameworks which bolster the collective construction and the community management of public services and infrastructure, from energy and water supplies to education. Since 2015, when *Barcelona en Comú* took over the city administration, the politics of urban commons in Barcelona has transferred municipal goods to communities for the realization of social and cultural projects. It has promoted the community management of public buildings and services, and it has striven for the “remunicipalization” of basic services. “Remunicipalization” included the establishment of a new energy company and the ongoing struggle to recuperate the privatized water company of Barcelona (Forné, Micciarelli & Fresnillo, 2018, pp. 142-145; Bonet i Martí, 2018, p. 114). In this context, the city drafted the “Citizen Assets program for community use and management”. This program regulates civic access to municipal goods and their transfer to citizens’ groups or communities (Forné, Micciarelli & Fresnillo, 2018, p. 145).

In the economic field, the mainspring of present-day political municipalism is to stimulate a local “self-centered” development, which valorizes existing resources and meets citizens’ needs with them. This other logic of “community” development is ecological. It takes account of the “externalities” it incurs. Community development is pluralist and it favors small enterprises, which are embedded in neighborhoods and are motivated by wider social and environmental concerns, beyond mere profit-seeking (Corrons, Alvarez & Fernández, 2018, pp. 175-177). In Barcelona, the city government

fostered the social and solidarity economy, and championed the co-production of economic politics with civic associations in various ways. It invested a considerable budget in this cause (4 million euros per year), and it opened thus funding lines for cooperatives and SSE initiatives. Furthermore, the administration implemented educational programs. It set up centers of information and support for new initiatives, it crafted instruments of coordination and support, and it knitted municipal and international networks (Corrons, Alvarez & Fernández, 2018, pp. 176-178).

Drawing a first balance

No doubt, despite its aspirations and enthusiasm, new municipalism was faced with daunting challenges and limitations from the outset. Beyond the “taking” of local government and a better style of administration, a radical realignment of local power relations and sustained struggle with potent oligarchies would be required to dislodge vested economic interests and corrupt elites at the municipal level. A major reform of the *national* institutional order, which in recent years abridged the political competences of municipalities and curtailed their resources, would be also in order. City governments control only 13% of the national state budget, while state legislation since 2013 (the “Montoro Law”) has prohibited the use of surpluses for social purposes (Bonet i Martí, 2018, p. 115, Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 50-51).

In 2019, four years after the first electoral victories of the new alter-municipalism in local elections and the end of the first term of municipalist governments, the balance was mixed and ambiguous in terms of its transformative effects. The fields in which new policy initiatives unfolded in several “cities of change” included: democratic empowerment, civic participation and control over the public administration; redistributive policies and increased social expenditure; reinforcement of social services and public care, particularly for vulnerable persons; gender equality; improvement of the quality of city life in districts and neighborhoods; a new model of urbanism beyond speculation, gentrification and touristification; sustainable, ecological and resilient cities; new urban economies focused around social and solidarity economies, circularity, proximity and healthy alimentary systems; new urban cultures and narratives; municipalist networks that intend to scale up and scale out municipalist politics on the regional, the national and the international level (Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 140-183; Méndez, 2019, pp. 116-129).

Outcomes are variable and diverge from city to city. Important breakthroughs have been accomplished in the core items of the municipalist agenda –citizens’ democracy and decentralization. Local forums and digital platforms for collective participation in policymaking were put in place in Madrid and Barcelona, among other cities. Digital media, which enable citizens to submit and vote their own policy proposals, participatory processes, through which municipal policies (such as the energy policies in Cádiz) are co-produced by citizens and authorities, the inclusion of social actors in the management of urban services, were all deployed to bridge the gap between the inside and the outside the institution. These initiatives reshaped the practices of public decision-making and incorporated new social agents (Méndez, 2019, p. 132). To illustrate, in the Decidim technopolitical machine of Barcelona, more than 1100 popular assemblies had been convened till the end of 2018. Approximately 13000 proposals had been submitted, out of which 9100 became thereafter public policies. The strategic plan of the city, which regards 40% of the city’s budget, has been co-decided through this digital platform (Barbadian, 2019, p. 196).

In the social economy, more specifically, Barcelona had a legacy of cooperativism long before the mayorship of Ada Colau. Yet, the strong sponsorship of the SSE by the administration of *Barcelona en Comú* raised its visibility and effectively doubled the number of cooperatives established per year (Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 218-219). Regarding policies of space, the “right to housing” has also been at the epicenter of the municipalist agenda in several cities, including Zaragoza and Barcelona, where Ada Colau and other members of the confluence were famously militants of the anti-eviction PAH movement. A battery of policies and a considerable increase of city funding have been channelled to help middle and lower classes pay the high rents of Barcelona or gain access to a ‘social rent,’ through the construction of council housing or “protected housing” by private constructors; the latter are now obliged to dedicate 30% of new constructions to affordable housing. Despite concerted efforts, budgetary constraints and the limited competences of city government did not allow it to adequately tend to exist needs and to prevent further rises in rents and house prices (Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 196-197).

Furthermore, municipalism in government had a strong feminist inflection. *Barcelona en Comú* placed at the core of its policies a robust and integral feminist agenda, which was co-produced by women’s collectives and municipal departments and revolved around four axes which traverse all aspects of city government and life: institutional change through a review of budgets, contracts, subsidies etc. from a perspective

of gender equality; economy for life and organization of time regarding employment, care, feminization of poverty; inhabitable and inclusive neighborhoods sustaining security, mobility and ecology; and city of rights, furthering gender equality in participation, culture, health, measures against male violence (Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 162-163, 204-205). The municipalist administration also inaugurated a municipal Department of Feminisms and LGTBI, as well as a Center of LGTBI resources.

Finally, new municipalist initiatives came to grips with the question of scale and systemic, global interconnections by converging in global and regional networks of “fearless cities” (Bertran, 2019). They launched confluences to contest regional elections (such as Catalunya en Comú–Podem), and they opened national channels of collective debate, collaboration, and mutual support among municipalist platforms in Spain (such as the networks and regular encounters of MAC and Municilab). The “benchmarking” of good, replicable practices of municipalist alter-politics, the composition of “protocols” and the exchange of knowledge around good practices have been also political precipitants, which were employed by municipalist organizations in order to overcome the diaspora of micro-spheres and to elicit system change (Russell, 2019, p. 20; Bertran, 2019, p. 280).

But these democratizing initiatives and counter-hegemonic politics have come up against institutional, bureaucratic, and party-political barriers, while collective deliberation and participation have been often scant and poor. Critics point out the relative lack of deliberative spaces and mechanisms through which participatory processes with civic associations can reach binding decisions. Digital politics tend also to reproduce inequalities based on class, age, education and geographical location (Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 140-142, 185-186). Furthermore, sound financial management decreased cities’ indebtedment and permitted considerable rises in social expenditure (e.g., up to 24% in the first year of Ahora Madrid’s term and 22.2% in the next year). But the austerity laws of the central state impeded the further expansion of redistributive social policies, uncovering the limits of municipal autonomy (Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 148-149). The same holds largely true for the policies of ‘cities of refuge,’ which attended to immigrants and refugees, seeking to offer hospitality, security, and housing (Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 156-157).

The municipalist policies of the “city of cares” catered to health, well-being and the everyday needs of citizens, in both emotional and material respects, meeting basic needs, assisting disabled persons, tending to immigrants etc. They cultivated, also, a more ‘caring’ and sensitive style of city administration, universal accessibility to health

services and social economy policies to fight unemployment (through e.g., the MARES project in Madrid). But the transversal implementation of this cluster of policies has encountered practical difficulties across the different departments of the administration (Kois, Morán & Prats, 2018, pp. 160-161).

Moreover, inhabiting the institutions brought on the typical institutional inertia and bureaucratization of the “new politics”. In addition to the legal and institutional bounds on the political power of municipalities in Spain, bureaucratic procedures, technical and political complexities, the forced compromises of minority or coalition governments, resistance by elites, an administrative staff which was not aligned with the municipalist projects, the daily agenda of city administration in conjunction with their administrative inexperience absorbed the energies of municipalist actors in city government. Municipal organizations were weakened, thus, and municipalist members of the administration lost contact with social movements, the neighborhoods and the streets. A feeling of exhaustion and isolation set in, exacerbated by the constant attacks by elite forces and mainstream media (Fundación de los communes, 2018, pp. 38-40; Collado, 2018, pp. 105-106; Monterde, 2019, pp. 45-47).

Short-term pressures, battles with financial and political elites, the complexities of articulating broad consensus, and institutional blockages, aggravated by national Catalan politics in Barcelona, have often resulted in the lack of concern with long-term plans, democratic processes, and integral, systemic narratives. The latter could have prompted the wider renewal of prevailing imaginaries and life-styles. What was arguably missing thus is “a tangible narrative that would allow the confluences to integrate their past achievements, present diagnoses, and future projects into a compelling account...[in] a framework that is immediately accessible to the broader public” (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017, p. 19).

Neoliberal imaginaries and power structures are still the order of the day. A counter-hegemonic contention will be long-haul. Discursive-affective interventions in popular imaginaries ensnared in neoliberalism will be a main plank of this counter-hegemonic enterprise. The mutations in political culture occasioned by 15M have turned out to be only incipient and far from diffuse across all sectors of the population. The traditional political culture of representation and delegation persists. Most of the people do not see political participation in democratic movements and institutions as a permanent chapter of their life (Martínez & Baciero, 2019, p. 250).

Indeed, after 2015 and an apparent “stabilization” or even “recovery” of the Spanish economy, the cycle of protest has suffered a relative paralysis, depriving thus the

municipalist formations of a source of power and impulse. The will to rupture and change the institutions gave often way to political moderation, “good management”, “governmentalism” and a conservative interpretation of the 15M political orientation, which gave up on the contestation of neoliberal and post-democratic regimes (García, 2018, p. 125; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017, p. 19).

Political trajectories and relations with social movements and citizens varied from one city to another. In Madrid, for instance, the new mayor practiced an old-style personalist politics. She essentially broke with the municipal confluence at the outset of her term in office. She held on to neoliberal “urban development” projects and she forsook the aspiration to reconstruct the “institutional machine”. Political direction was largely concentrated in her hands, and it was divorced from the social bases of the movement. In the absence of institutional checks, it was almost impossible for the municipalist constituency in Madrid to exert control over the members of the council it had elected. The links between institutions and movements broke apart soon. A compromising attitude towards powerful corporate interests was adopted, while austerity politics was not effectively challenged (Méndez, 2019; García López, 2019).

In Barcelona, by contrast, social movements, which were also partly incorporated in the administration, took to the politics of lobbying. They remained active outside the institutional realm, and they pressurized the city government of Ada Colau, pushing for policies beyond the reformist mold. They opted, thus, for a political stance of both collaboration and conflict with the ‘new politics,’ confronting new reformism with a political disposition of being both inside and against the institution (Fundación de los communes, 2018, pp. 46-47).

In general, the transformative power and the will of municipalist politics to oppose the status quo hinge largely on the effective organization and activity of the municipalist platforms which launch the project of change. These will decline to the point of death under three, at least, circumstances, as recent lessons from Spanish municipalism indicate. First, if the elected representatives of the platform, who command the main decision-making power in city administration and enjoy the greatest public prominence, arrogate all decisive and communicative power to themselves rather than remaining organically connected with the municipalist community and social movements. Second, if the municipalist formation does not maintain strong linkages and living circuits of interaction with democratic movements, associations, and ordinary citizens in the city, drawing sustenance from their demands, their proposals, their energies, their critiques

and their dreams. To effect change, municipalism must be profoundly social and focus on social movements and civil society (García López, 2019).

Third, if an autonomous and expansive operation of the platform, territorially grounded in neighborhood assemblies and sectorial groups, is not sustained over time. When this independent organizational life and the territorial roots are lacking, the municipalist project is bound to lose control over its elected representatives. The reassertion of hierarchies, centralization, bureaucratization, and conservatism follow suit (the case of Madrid is telling in this respect; see Carmona, 2019). Herein lies a key organizational challenge for municipalist alter-politics. It can fruitfully respond by cementing organizational bonds between institutional spaces, the platforms themselves and social movements, and by investing in network collaboration, the exchange of knowledge and mutual reinforcement among municipalist schemes (Martínez & Beciaro, 2019, p. 246; Bertran, 2019, p. 288).

Five years after their upsurge, it appears now that to turn municipal formations into more powerful vehicles of counter-hegemonic organization for commoning democracy, their radical popular and counter-hegemonic aspects should be enhanced. More emphasis should be placed on figuring antagonistic new visions, which can consolidate new popular identities, steering them away from neoliberal imaginaries. Scaling out and scaling up on the regional, national, continental, and global plane is also a vital condition for powerful counter-hegemonic contention in a complex world. The internal life of the platform should be nourished and fortified, as a dynamic political scheme which is autonomous from the city administration and can really direct its policies. The institutional devices to hold municipal officers accountable and directly responsible to the municipal organization and citizens should be adequately mobilized and amplified. Finally, the real implication of ordinary citizens in fundamental decision-making and the monitoring of policy execution, both in the platform and in city administration, should be broadened and deepened. This is the foundation of a 'common' democracy, whereby power flows from below.

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