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Beyond the Local Trap: New Municipalism and the Rise of the Fearless Cities

Bertie Russell

Urban Institute, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK;
b.russell@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract: The Fearless Cities summit, coordinated by Barcelona en Comú in June 2017, marked the first global gathering of the nascent "new municipalist" movement. Responding to the "imperative that geographers engage critically and creatively with the way localism is being articulated", this paper argues that the new municipalist initiatives are developing urban political strategies that successfully avoid the Local Trap. Rather than essentialising cities as inherently progressive or democratic, the municipal is instead becoming framed as a "strategic front" for developing a transformative politics of scale. Given this critical awareness, this nascent movement demonstrates how local loyalties can be mobilised as part of a progressive scalar strategy without falling into the trap of a "particular localism". What remains to be seen is whether these initiatives are able to develop a variegated scalar strategy of transformation that retains the democratic essence that underpins them.

Resumen: El encuentro Ciudades sin Miedo, organizado por Barcelona en Comú en junio de 2017, marcó la primera reunión mundial del naciente movimiento del "nuevo municipalismo". Respondiendo al "imperativo de que los geógrafos estudien crítica y creativamente la manera en que se articula el localismo" (Featherstone et al. 2012: 181), este artículo sostiene que las nuevas iniciativas municipalistas están desarrollando estrategias políticas urbanas que evitan con éxito la trampa local. En lugar de "esencializar" ciudades como inherentemente progresista o democrático, lo municipal se está enmarcando como un "frente estratégico" para desarrollar una política de escala que sea transformadora. Teniendo en cuenta esta conciencia crítica, este movimiento naciente demuestra cómo se pueden movilizar las lealtades locales como parte de una estrategia multiescala progresiva sin caer en la trampa de un "localismo particular". Lo que queda por ver es si estas iniciativas son capaces de desarrollar una estrategia multiescala de transformación que retenga la esencia democrática que las sustenta.

Keywords: New Municipalism, local trap, urban democracy, politics of scale, politics of proximity

Introduction

> The time is now to strengthen our network. I would like to call out to this international alliance—to be courageous and ambitious. We want to transform the reality—we want to be the politics of the majority... (Ada Colau, Fearless Cities closing plenary)

In June 2017—less than two years after the unprecedented election of the housing rights activist Ada Colau as Barcelona's first female mayor—the political "confluence" Barcelona en Comú hosted the first international Fearless Cities summit.

Bringing together more than 700 officially registered participants from six continents, Fearless Cities was the first time many of these initiatives had been brought into conversation with one another. With a series of regional Fearless Cities gatherings having occurred throughout 2018 (in Warsaw, New York, Brussels and Valparaiso), a second North America gathering reputedly in planning, and a second global gathering scheduled for the Autumn of 2019, the four hot days spent gathered in the classrooms, gardens and grand halls of the Universitat de Barcelona may come to be known as the "coming out party" of the global new municipalist movement.

The gathering itself demonstrated the breadth of municipalist movements that had begun to identify with some broader phenomena—ranging from Zagreb je Naš in Croatia, Miasto Jes Nasze in Warsaw, Cooperation Richmond in California, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, Ne Davimo Beograd in Belgrade, the Autonomous Government of Rojava, Cambiamo Messina dal Basso in Messina, Movimiento Autonomista in Valparaíso, Ciudad Futura in Rosario, Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi, Beirut Madinati from Lebanon, and a number of other Spanish cities such as Marea Atlantica in A Coruña and Zaragoza en Común in Zaragoza (see Figure 1). What was clearly shared between these initiatives was some form of orientation towards an urban politics, and some sense of shared commitment to the progressive social force that Barcelona en Comú (BComú) had come to represent. Beyond this, it was far less clear as to why this call for a global gathering of Fearless Cities—a term coined by activists working in BComú's International Committee—appeared to have such broad resonance.

Through a series of interviews conducted before and during Fearless Cities, ethnographic research, and textual analysis of literature emerging from these initiatives, this paper serves to examine some of the discourses and narratives that

Figure 1: Map of participants at Fearless Cities (source: Barcelona en Comú [http://fearlesscities.com/en; CC BY-SA 4.0]; reproduced here with permission) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

are coming to "animate" these otherwise diverse movements. Rather than providing fixed definitions or final statements, it takes the words of participants from municipalist platforms from seven cities across the global North and South to sketch out some emerging commonalities. From the feminisation of politics to a focus on the commons and the solidarity economy, a series of strategic political approaches and priorities are emerging that may come to characterise these movements and inspire others.

The research indicates that whilst these movements are developing in very different political, economic and social contexts, they are nonetheless undertaking an informal process of collaborative "theory building". Although they undoubtedly draw on different inspirations, activists within these movements are not looking to justify or explain their approaches according to existing theoretical work or pre-defined political ideologies—these initiatives are neither anarchist nor socialist, neither radical nor reformist, neither Bookchin-ists nor Harvey-ists. In short, practice appears to be running ahead of theory, and these diverse initiatives are— whilst in-movement and in-practice—looking to develop their own theoretical understanding of what they have in common.

This paper argues that this nascent process of "collaborative theory building" provides a significant insight into how a situated and "locally" grounded politics can nonetheless work to avoid falling into what Mark Purcell (2006) calls the "local trap". Rather than conflating "local autonomy with greater democracy or justice" and thus repeating "the tendency of researchers and activists to assume something inherent about the local scale" (Purcell 2006:1931, 1924), these initiatives appear to be adopting the "municipal" as a *strategic* entry point for developing broader practices and theories of transformative social change. To borrow a phrase used by Professor Mike Geddes at a recent conference on "Municipal Socialism in the 21st Century",[1] activists within these initiatives appear to share the recognition that "the question is not what the local state can do, but what can we do to the local state?" Rather than mistakenly valorising the capacities of municipal government—which in any case, could not be generalised across a diversity of political, social and economic contexts—there is instead a focus on the municipality as a strategic site for developing a transformative and prefigurative politics.

Although there is by no means a conclusive theoretical position as to why and how the municipal scale is a privileged strategic entry point for organising, this research indicates a nexus of propositions that take us in this direction. Through reframing the local as an issue of proximity, there is a shift of emphasis away from valorising the municipality as a smaller and thus inherently better or more democratic level of government. Instead, the emphasis is on the potential to mobilise a range of social forces—from both within and without the municipal authorities— to instead "democratise" institutions such that decision-making and power are distributed outwards.

Ultimately, this fragmented set of perspectives helps us ground the claim that "municipalism is not an end in itself. It's a means by which to achieve [our] vital goals" (Roth and Baird 2017). More than a new wave of localist politics, we can understand these initiatives as contributing to a *municipalist* theory and practice

that responds to Purcell's demand that "what is to be done, what we all must do together, is to engage in a collective and perpetual struggle to democratise our society and to manage our affairs for ourselves" (2013:2). To this extent, these municipalist movements can be seen as embodying "an argument against localism but for ... a politics *of* place *beyond* place" (Massey 2007:15).

These movements remain nascent, and further comparative research will be required to understand in more depth how the "animating narratives" of these movements unfold in practice. Significant questions remain for both scholars and movements themselves regarding how to "scale out" (Russell and Roth 2018) their practices, and whether they are capable of avoiding capture by an established politics of scale that typically positions the municipality as "a strategic site for the deepening and extension of neoliberalization" (Oosterlynck and González 2013:1081).

Fearless Cities and the Local Trap

It is by no means chance that the Fearless Cities gathering was hosted by the organisation governing the Catalan capital, rather than by one of the many other new municipalist initiatives in attendance. Barcelona en Comú's position as a flagship of this new municipalist movement was already well established, not least due to the tireless work of those in their International Committee, who focused on building relationships and disseminating their experiences of attempting to "imagine a different city" and develop "the power to transform it" (BComú 2016). In a now well rehearsed narrative, BComú was born out of the experiences of social movements such as 15-M (see Cameron 2015; Vilaseca 2014) and La Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) (Colau and Alemany 2012), which had spent more than five years working to resist and defend citizens against the impact of austerity measures and the financial crisis. This was coupled with a political system riddled with corruption—perhaps best illustrated by the vote of no-confidence in the former Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy for his involvement in the Gürtel corruption scandal—and a perceived absence of "real democracy" in the face of a two-party system that had governed since the Transition from 40 years of dictatorship.

For the small group of activists that decided to form Guanyem Barcelona in mid-2014—the organisation that would develop into the electoral "confluence" known as Barcelona en Comú (BComú)—this was an opportunity to build a new form of political power, one that aspired to take the ethos of these social movements and find ways to apply them to the governance of their city. The group, which included Ada Colau, announced they would seek a popular mandate to form a "citizens platform" that "breaks from the past and builds the future at the May 2015 elections" (Guanyem Barcelona 2015). Having secured tens of thousands of signatures in favour of the initiative, Guanyem facilitated the co-authoring of a Principles and Commitments document, a code of ethics that would look to guard against the institutionalisation of those elected to public office.

In less than a year, Guanyem developed a political structure that embraced many of the demands for "real democracy" that had been both a set of practices

and a rallying call of the 15-M movement. Funded through crowd-sourcing and without corporate donations or bank loans, a series of thematic working groups and neighbourhood forums drafted an "emergency action plan" for the first 12 months in office. Following a legal challenge over the use of their name, Guanyem Barcelona became Barcelona en Comú, and built an electoral slate out of individuals that subscribed to the "Principles and Commitments". In what has been called *la confluencia*, this electoral slate brought together activists with no previous experience of formal politics along with individuals from three other parties. Ada Colau was unchallenged in standing as mayoral candidate.

Illustrative of the comparatively high profile of Barcelona, similar initiatives such as Marea Atlantica, Ahora Madrid, and Zaragoza en Común—which in Spain have since the beginning collectively referred to themselves as *Ciudades del Cambio* ("Cities of Change")—received considerably less international attention. Coupled with the 18 months of networking undertaken by the International Committee, BComú was thus in a unique position to issue a rallying call in the Spring of 2017: "Now is the time to demonstrate the potential of towns and cities to resist hate and to spur democratic transformation across the world" (BComú 2017).

Fearless Cities itself was preceded by an academic-orientated workshop entitled "What about New Municipalism? Austerity, Globalization and Democracy", hosted by Laura Roth and Joan Subirats—academics very closely connected to the work of Barcelona en Comú. The workshop was structured around these three themes, in each case relating discussion back to the "new municipalist" initiatives. The term *nuevo muncipalismo* had already started to be used informally at previous gatherings of activists involved in Spanish municipalist platforms, such as at Municipalismo, Autogobierno y Contrapoder (MAC) workshops in July 2016, Malaga, and January 2017, Pamplona. Whilst the latter now act more as gatherings for municipalists acting outside the institutions, the MAC gatherings can nonetheless be considered as prototypes of the Fearless Cities gathering.

Although the experience of Barcelona and the Spanish cities *is* unrepeatable in the most literal sense, the Fearless Cities gathering dispelled any mistaken belief that parallels could not be drawn with elsewhere. This was not a one-way opportunity to learn from Barcelona, but a mutual sharing of experiences, organising strategies and approaches to what could be called a "new municipalist" form of organising. As one of the interviewees from Jackson, Mississippi outlined:

> Being in Barcelona again, in a space where so many people from so many different parts of the world are talking about how *municipalism is operating in their local areas*, really lets us be able to think about it in our own context. It's really affirming for the work that we're doing, and then being able to go back home and talk about it and hopefully inspire other people to see that people are doing this, people are doing it very successfully in other places and that we're not alone. (Anna, Cooperation Jackson, emphasis added)

Yet this is evidently not the first time that activists from different cities and regions have come together to discuss their organising. Beginning in 2001 in Porto Alegre, the earlier years of the World Social Forum and interstitial regional Social Forums provided a regular mixing point for the many activists that constituted the

alterglobalisation movement. Whilst the mantra of "one no, many yeses" served to unite a diverse movements of movements against neoliberal globalisation, the forums themselves demonstrated that "significant conflict [lay] between the different scales of political demands: the local, the national, and the global" (Ponniah 2004:131).

This issue of political scale is undoubtedly not a new one. Writing before the World Social Forum had been conceived, Erik Swyngedouw noted that "the thorny issues of maintaining or consolidating local power versus the danger of incorporation and compromise at a higher scale remains an eternal quandary for social movements" (1997:561). In particular, Swyngedouw expressed the concern that whilst "local loyalties are central in any emancipatory politics … what is disturbing in contemporary politics of resistance … [is] that oppositional groups have failed to transcend these confines of a 'militant particularism' or 'particular localism'" (1997:576–577). The fact that the "municipalist" initiatives are routinely adopting scalar terminology in their self-definition—whether it be Fearless *Cities*, New *Municipalism*, or *Ciudades* del Cambio—should alert Geographers to being particularly watchful of the "eternal quandary" returning us to yet another round of "particular localism".

Perhaps the clearest critique of the shortcomings of "particular localism" has been made by Mark Purcell, who warned that "as we discover, narrate and invent new ideas about democracy and citizenship in cities, it is critical to avoid what I call the local trap, in which the local scale is assumed to be inherently more democratic than other scales" (2005:1921). His argument rests upon the premise that "scales are not independent entities with pre-given characteristics. Instead, they are socially constructed strategies to achieve particular ends. Therefore, any scale or scalar strategy can result in any outcome. Localisation can lead to a more democratic city, or a less democratic one" (Purcell 2006:1921–1922).

Central to this understanding is the established claim that we should view scale through a "constructionist framework" and reject a view in which scale is ascribed "an ontologically given category". As Marston has outlined, "scale is not necessarily a preordained hierarchical framework for ordering the world—local, regional, national, global. It is instead a contingent outcome of the tensions that exist between structural forces and the practices of human agents" (2000:220). A breadth of critical scholarship has contributed to and developed our understanding of scale as something which is socially and materially produced (see also Brenner 2001; Delaney and Leitner 1997; Escobar 2001; Jones et al. 2017; Leitner and Miller 2007; Leitner et al. 2008; Miller 1994; Moore 2008; Smith 1992). Despite the provocation of Marston et al. (2005:416) that we should "eliminate scale as a concept" and "offer a different ontology … that so flattens scale as to render the concept unnecessary", we can largely accept that, much like concepts such as "good" and "evil", whether scale is real or not it, it is nonetheless both *constructed* and plays a clear role in *structuring* the world.

Such a pragmatic approach to scale has led Featherstone et al. to argue that "it is crucial to engage with struggles over the terms of debate around localism and to contribute to strategies of collective resistance" and to refuse to allow localism to be wholly captured by an "anti-state populist agenda" (2012:177–178) that

functions to enable a roll-back/roll-out neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002). To not contest scale is to forgo a particularly powerful discursive tool that is being used to shape and legitimise political agendas—yet contesting scale *does not mean* valorising the "national" or "international" in opposition to the "local". Framing scale as a site for political contestation, they warn against the

> assumption that localism is something with uniformly positive social force [which] structures the debate in a problematic way by attributing political content a particular spatial form (Massey 2005). This closes own a particularly important set of questions about what kind of localism is being constituted. (Featherstone et al. 2012:179)

This returns us to the proposition that "what is to be done, what we all must do together, is to engage in a collective and perpetual struggle to democratize our society and to manage our affairs for ourselves" (Purcell 2013:2). For Purcell, the imperative to democratise is posited as the process through which *constituent power*—understood as the permanent, autonomous, creative, vital and self-organising capacity of society—can find ways to govern itself, rather than be governed by another. The imperative to democratise is thus the practice of actualising "urban society", to supplement the "kernel and virtuality" (Lefebvre 1996:148) of another way of living together with concrete manifestations of governing ourselves, and to "cut a path beyond the present oligarchy and toward the horizon of a possible democracy" (Purcell 2013:26).

Yet this demand to democratise can never take root in abstract space: *who* is involved in this process of democratisation, and the *place* through which it happens (and which is simultaneously transformed), is absolutely central. As Margaret Kohn (2003) observed in her account of municipalist movements in early-20th century Italy—which by her account, have perhaps the clearest lineage with the contemporary municipalist movements explored in this paper—it is unavoidable that "place plays a role in transformative politics", and that we must challenge the "widespread suspicion that a political appeal to place is conservative, essentialist, or anachronistic". To the contrary, a municipalist politics is "a political approach to community [that] mobilizes the resources of locality for an explicitly political agenda", one which "involves citizens in governing through participation … that blur[s] the line between state and civil society" (Cohn 2003:152–153, 138–139).

Davina Cooper's recent call for "radical politics [to] engage with the fantasy of what stateness could and should entail" echoes this blurring of the lines, and recognises that municipalist strategies must be understood as more than instances of the "local state temporarily directed towards progressive ends" (2017:351, 343). Drawing on aspects of British municipal socialism in the 1980s, Cooper suggests that it is the "micro-materiality of life … evident at the municipal level" that provides local government with a particular capacity to "create and affirm new kinds of everyday practices" (2017:345) that may bolster the capacity of societies to govern themselves. Perhaps however this is more than "engaging with fantasy" but rather learning how to develop an approach that "steps back from the real without, however, losing sight of it" (Lefebvre 2003:7), recognising we have no choice but to start in a present that we must immediately go beyond. Equally,

perhaps this is less about envisioning "stateness"—something which has the potential of reiterating a state-centred focus on the machinations of constituted power—but rather about if and how different elements of the state apparatus can be used *against itself* in bolstering the capacity of societies to govern themselves, something which surely fits with Cooper's emphasis on the prefigurative potential of municipalist initiatives.

That these movements—both historic and contemporary—adopted the municipality as a strategic front for organising does not mean they imbue the "local" or the "city" with intrinsic qualities, nor that they are locked into a "particular localism". To the contrary, they demonstrate Davidson and Iveson's thesis of "the ongoing importance of 'the city' as a key category for critical urban theory" and the "democratic utility of the city to an emancipatory politics" (2015:647–648). This is not driven by a claim that "the urban is inherently more important than wider scales (or non-urban places)" (Purcell 2005:1937), but that cities are the *places* these movements are, initially, finding ways to manifest their constituent power, experimenting with how to establish radically democratic processes. In doing so, many within these municipalist movements are coming to challenge conventional scalar understandings that power must accumulate upwards, and instead recognise that "this orientation towards the city remains a crucial way in which a politics of urbanization that potentially extends beyond 'the city' takes shape" (Davidson and Iveson 2015:657).

Introducing and Researching the New Municipalism

The research was conducted over an 18-month period beginning in September 2016 (see Figure 2). Ethnographic research at the Fearless Cities summit, textual analysis of literature emerging from these initiatives (including relevant social media posts), and a series of secondary interviews (see Büllesbach et al. 2017) were used alongside a series of 12 audio and video interviews conducted during two visits to Barcelona in March and June 2017. The interviews were conducted with movement activists, elected councillors, former council advisors, employees of political parties and civil servants from seven different cities. The interviewees were part of initiatives in Barcelona (Barcelona en Comú), Madrid (Madrid 129), Rosario (Ciudad Futura), Jackson (Cooperation Jackson), Naples (Massa Critica), Bologna (Coalizione Civica), and Beirut (Beirut Madinati). Pseudonyms have been used for all of the interviewees, and will be indicated through an italicised first name and organisation in brackets.

They were sampled based on their invitation and/or attendance at the Fearless Cities gathering, and by no means provide an exhaustive account of the different groups in attendance. Given the breadth of the topic, this paper makes no attempt to provide a comprehensive or rigorous account of the individual cases. On the contrary, this research has looked to identify points of intersection between the initiatives, examining some of the central discourses that animate these movements. We should not assume the findings of this research can be applied uncritically to municipalist initiatives not engaged in the research, nor should we assume internal homogeneity *within* these initiatives.

Figure 2: Breakout group at Fearless Cities discussing "Building non-state institutions" (source: author) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Whilst the visibility of these new municipal initiatives is often due to their engagement with municipal electoral politics, it would be wrong to read them primarily as electoral phenomena. Across the initiatives explored in this research, there are some fundamental differences in terms of how these initiatives relate strategically to municipal state institutions. These differences are significant enough to suggest that it would be tenuous, at best, to suggest these initiatives constitute a nascent municipalist movement based primarily on their engagement with electoral politics. Furthermore, as Kali Akuno—a prominent activist in Cooperation Jackson—discusses in reference to the political strategy of Jackson, Mississippi:

> too much emphasis has been placed on electoral politics in reference to the Jackson-Kush Plan ... this reflects a deep, manufactured bias in bourgeois societies that orients the public towards paying more attention and giving more credence to the illusions of "democratic governance", rather than the real contests for political and social power. (Akuno and Nangwaya 2017:49)

These new municipalist initiatives *must not* be understood simply as left political parties looking to implement progressive policies at the municipal scale. Engagement with institutions and elections should be understood as a component of broader strategic approaches, rather than the defining feature of the new municipalism. Nonetheless, it is useful to provide an initial survey of those municipalist movements through focusing on their emergence with respect to formal municipal institutions.

In the case of both Barcelona (Barcelona en Comú) and Madrid (Ahora Madrid), electoral *confluencias* were formed between movement activists and left parties such as Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds, Equo, Esquerra Unida, and

Podemos. As introduced at the beginning of this paper—and as is shared with other Spanish municipalist platforms in Zaragoza, A Coruña, and Valencia—these confluences had their roots in the 15-M movement and associated struggles. In both Barcelona and Madrid, those who conceptualised and initiated these *confluencias* were primarily the activists and academics that had "cut their teeth" occupying the squares and resisting housing evictions across Spain.

These *confluencias* were more than conventional electoral alliances, requiring participants to (at least, formally) make commitments that would take precedence over any pre-existing party ties, such as adopting a "code of ethics" that would impose conditions on elected officials regarding salaries, external funding, future employment opportunities, and maximum terms for re-election. In both cities, these electoral confluences were successful in forming minority governments in 2015, securing a number of councillors along with the mayorships of Ada Colau (a housing right activist) and Manuela Carmena (a lawyer).

In Rosario (Argentina), three councillors were elected in 2013 as representatives of Ciudad Futura, a "movement-party" formed as a coordination between social-movement organisations (Giros and M26) that had a history of social initiatives such as the establishment of the "ÉTICA secondary-school and kindergarten, the Tambo La Resistencia dairy farm, Distrito Siete cultural centre, and the food cooperative Misión Anti-inflación" (Baird 2016) and the Giros brick cooperative. The decision to submit candidates for election in the municipal government quite literally had its foundations in the social work of these two organisations, which continues to be the principle focus of the organisation.

In Bologna (Italy), two councillors were elected in 2016 as part of Coalizione Civica, a "bottom to the top" (*Clara*, Coalizione Civica) electoral platform formed in the context of a centre-left municipal government that had been perceived as exacerbating the city's housing crisis. The platform was composed of participants from renowned social centres such as Làbas and associated social movements, disillusioned former members of the centrist Partito Democratico, along with citizens who had no formal prior engagement with political organising. The two councillors are firmly in a minority as "an opposition on the Left of a centre-Left government" (*Clara*, Coalizione Civica), and thus commonly find themselves playing the role of amplifying ongoing struggles within the city, such as defending the jobs of public sector workers or fighting against library closures.

In the case of Naples (Italy) a former judge, Luigi de Magistris, was elected as Mayor in 2011, standing as part of a centrist party that stood against the systemic corruption of Naples political system. Throughout the course of his first term his political perspective shifted significantly to the left, not least due to a conflict with Partito Democratico regarding accusations of abuse of public office. By the time of his second candidacy for mayor in 2016, he had gained the backing of a range of social centres and social movements—not least Massa Critica. Formed at the beginning of 2016, Massa Critica is a set of "people, collective, committees, associations and social networks"—including a number of Naples social centres—committed to creating a "political platform of radical democracy" (*Luca*, Massa Critica) in the city. Whilst de Magistris did not find his roots in such movements, he became responsive to democratic social initiatives such as Massa

Critica, working to adopt citizen-led policy suggestions such as the establishment of a Department of the Commons.

In Jackson (Mississippi, USA), the engagement with formal municipal electoral structures also comes predominately through their relationship with the mayor. Whereas in Naples the strategic relationship developed *after* the initial mayoral election, the 2013 election of the late Chokwe Lumumba was grounded in a long history of movement organising. A committed black radical and a veteran of the New Afrikan Peoples Organisation (NAPO), Chokwe went on to cofound the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM), a nationwide organisation that developed what became known as the Jackson-Kush (JK) Plan. The JK Plan is built around three organisational pillars: building a broad-based solidarity economy, building people's assemblies, and building an independent black political party (see Akuno 2012). Following his untimely death in 2014, Chokwe's son—Antar Lumumba— was elected Mayor of Jackson in June 2017 on the promise to make Jackson "the most radical city on the planet".

In Beirut, a coordination of citizen-activists and academics stood in the 2016 municipal elections under the banner of Beirut Madinati, receiving 30% of the vote. The electoral slate looked to harness the momentum of some of the largest protests in Lebanon in over a decade, as disputes amongst the political class led to a crisis in Beirut's garbage collection. The winner-takes-all nature of the Lebanese municipal electoral system meant this significant electoral support did not translate into any formal representation on the city council. Whilst the electoral campaign was Beirut Madinati's foundation, a significant aspect of their subsequent work has been directed towards practical social efforts, focusing on issues ranging from noise pollution to the gentrification of neighbourhoods, with the intention of building an "enduring political organization with roots in Beirut's neighborhoods" (Cambanis 2017:1); whereas "traditional political parties are all about discussing ideologies and, you know, philosophies and big ideas, and we on the opposite wanted to start solving some of the problems" (*Shameer*, Beirut Madinati). Indeed, with around half of Beirut's population ineligible to vote in the municipal elections—including a number of the key organisers in Beirut Madinati —the electoral aspect of the organisation could only ever be a relative component in a wider organisational strategy.

In each of these initiatives, there have been qualitatively different circumstances and approaches to engaging with the municipal electoral system. The relationship between movements and institutions is often far from seamless, and there have been open tensions between some elected officials and the movements that buoyed them. Whilst in the best instance this takes the form of a productive tension, it is important not to read these strategic engagements with the local state as a consensus or as the resolution of the long-standing challenges movements face when engaging with constituted state power.

Although perhaps obvious, it should be stated that these initiatives developed independently of one another—including the various cases in Spain—and without following any commonly defined "organising strategy". Each initiative has a significant commitment to community organising, social work, or grassroots organising over issues ranging from housing to waste collection. In some instances this

organising is integrated within an organisation that stood candidates for election, whilst in others this work is undertaken by separate yet contributory organisations (such as the Italian social centres). With one exception (Jackson first elected Chokwe Lumumba as a councillor in 2009, also as part of MXGM's strategy), all of the "institutional" moments of these initiatives emerged from 2013 onwards. Furthermore— and as will be expanded upon in the following section—all of these initiatives emerged and are organisationally autonomous from any national political party.

Understanding the New Municipalism

The research has identified a nexus of propositions that demonstrate the ways in which these municipalist initiatives are striving to avoid conflating the "municipal with greater democracy or justice" (Purcell 2006:1931), and instead are in the midst of an ad hoc process of collaborative theory building that understands the municipal as a *strategic scale* through which to exercise a prefigurative and transformative politics. The research identifies interconnected fragments which, when taken collectively, are part of building a new "spatial imaginary" that demonstrates the importance of a politics of scale in these emergent political alternatives: the reframing of the local as a politics of proximity, the attempt to transform institutions and distribute power, and its manifestation as a "becoming common of the public".

A Politics of Proximity

The initiatives engaged with in this research emerged not only independently, but sometimes through a conscious distancing from, progressive left-wing national parties. In the case of both Ahora Madrid and Barcelona en Comú, the municipal electoral platforms were conceived only a few months after the formation of the national party Podemos—another child of the 15M movement (see Cameron 2015; Vilaseca 2014)—and their surprise success in the 2014 European elections. Podemos changed the character of the national political scene in Spain, introducing a populist anti-austerity discourse and crashing a two-party system dominated by the Partido Popular and PSOE since the transition in the late 1970s. From the outside, there appeared to be a breadth of similarities between Spain's municipalist movements and the national Podemos.

However, despite commonalities, municipalist movements have found themselves building on a unique potential of the urban—*proximity*. In its simplest form, we can understand the quality of proximity being the observation that:

> The local level … is the level where you have more accessibility to change everyday life. (*Estela*, Participant in BComú thematic group)

> The local level is the place and a space where these shifts and change can truly be transformative in terms of impacting people's lives. (*Anna*, Cooperation Jackson)

> We really believe that the city is the main space and level where you still have that direct rapport between the citizens and the people that they elect in the institutions. (*Clara*, Coalizione Civica)

Yet the reason why this local or urban scale is seen to contain a greater basis for transformative change is not simply due to "physical closeness". That people live *physically* close to one another does not necessarily mean that they have been brought into proximity; rather, we should read proximity as a project, something that has to be harnessed and realised. Indeed:

> We live in cities that are so condensed with people ... and yet we are much further than any point in history, and we're so alone as people ... So for me, proximity is going back to human connections and human relations... because we can be so close physically yet really so far. (*Shameer*, Beirut Madinati)

It seems more appropriate to suggest that these initiatives are harnessing the potential of the urban scale through adopting a *politics of proximity*, the concrete bringing together of bodies (rather than citizens, who already come with a territory) in the activation of municipalist political processes that have the capacity to produce new political subjectivities. This politics of proximity is commensurate with Merrifield's reading of the Lefebvrian "encounter", in which we

> posit the power of encounters as the stuff of radical politics, the stuff that percolates *through the whole social fabric*, through the entire zone of possible militant praxis. The notion of "Encounter", after all, is a tale of how people come together as *human beings*, of why collectivities are formed and how solidarity somehow takes hold, takes shape, shapes up. (2011:473)

Indeed, this would suggest that these municipalist movements are mobilising the "stuff" of the encounter to produce:

> a different kind of battle from the past. It's not a battle for themselves, for their identity—we are communist, we are anarchist, we are ... no. It's a battle directly from the people. For example, I fight for the hospital, I fight for commons, I fight for water, I fight for these single rights ... *I fight in a near, near way,* for some rights where normal people are directly involved. (*Luca*, Massa Critica, emphasis added)

The emphasis is not on adopting a political scale that belongs to established political order, but rather on producing a different form of politics—"a different kind of battle"—that fundamentally demands the production of a different political scale:

> Proximity is interesting but not as a way to implement something in a smaller scale, it's not a way to implement the state conception of the world in a smaller scale. It's a way to actually modify this level of the local government into something that is different, that actually operates at a different scale. (*Sophie*, Madrid 129)

It is fitting that the foundational meeting of Ahora Madrid—which took place at the Reina Sofia Museum on 21 June 2014—was convened under the slogan "Democracy Begins Close to You" (see Rubio-Pueyo 2017:8). Where this politics of proximity is referred to as "local" organising, we should thus be wary of hasty assumptions that these initiatives exemplify a parochial politics limited to matters of narrow concern. At a minimum, we should recognise there is a relatively unsurfaced debate between at least two perspectives; those who understand municipal

action as the "state conception of the world in a smaller scale", and those who see municipalism as the production of an altogether new scale of politics:

> There is this tension within Barcelona en Comú between those who defend a more municipalist strategy and those … who believe the most important thing is—since states are the places when the main decisions are still made—then that's where we should win, that's where we should get power. (*Vane*, BComú)

Whilst the *real politik* of attempting to transform municipal institutions means that "you also need some help from other levels of government, which is tricky" (*Vane*), there are nonetheless those who see the "municipalist strategy" as challenging the very *form* of an established political order based on a *politics of separation*. We can thus make sense of the claim that municipalism points to:

> the possibility of constructing a new kind of power in society which is precisely in the hands of ordinary people, but organised ordinary people. Ordinary people that have started down the path of prefiguration … This is very much linked to discussions we had at Fearless Cities about whether this municipalism, this struggle for local government, which allows for proximity, is about us being content with this level because it's as far as we can go, or whether it's appropriate to this structure. Local politics is more than just our origin… we think it's a strategy as well, because it's what allows us to project our experiences on another scale. (*Paola*, Ciudad Futura)

The politics of proximity should not therefore be mistaken for a fetishisation of the "local", even though it finds its manifestation through the municipality. Rather, we should understand the politics of proximity as being concerned with *those forces that pull us together*, as opposed to *those forces that push us apart*. Whilst contemporary urbanisation is characterised by the ever-increasing massification of bodies—note the hackneyed observation that more than half of the global population now lives in cities—this same urbanisation is driven by dynamics that pull us ever further apart. Perhaps it is precisely because of this contradiction that the municipality has, across those initiatives engaged with, been adopted as a key site *through which* a politics of proximity can be pursued.

The Transformation of Institutions and the Distribution of Power

Although the visibility of these new municipal initiatives is often due to their engagement with municipal electoral politics, it is a mistake to read them primarily as electoral phenomena concerned with "governing better". On the contrary, animated by a politics of proximity, these municipalist initiatives share a focus on *transforming* these institutions, bringing people closer to decisions that affect them as part of a wider orientation towards collective and collaborative self-government. As such, where there is engagement with municipal institutions, the logic is not to "appropriate or monopolise these constructs or these experiences in any way, as the state would usually do" (*Paola*), but rather "to actually modify this level of the local government into something that is different" (*Sophie*).

In looking to expand on these distinct approaches, de Alòs-Moner (who works as part of Barcelona en Comú's communications team) suggested there are two fundamentally different types of municipalism. Whereas the first type "consist[s] only in taking office, reaching as many seats as possible, and making progressive policies", the second form of municipalism is also committed to:

> transforming the institution itself and its mechanisms in order to distribute power. This second kind of municipalism entails … giving autonomy to the social movements and opening the institution in order to let them act as a counterbalance. Once you have distributed power you lose the monopoly of the strategy and the agenda, so this second type of municipalism entails losing part of the control of the political process, but enhancing the changing process. (de Alòs-Moner 2017)

A recurring principle is the erosion of distinctions between the governed and those who govern—to challenge a traditional politics of separation—affirming these institutions as being more than administrative units, but spaces of political experimentation. Whilst not all of the initiatives adopted an electoral slate, they consistently require practicing a degree of mutual openness between the populace, social movements, and municipal institutions. The point of reference is not the institutions themselves, but rather the "active structure of social movements, civil organisations and active citizens claiming their rights to own their cities' future" (de Magistris in Büllesbach et al. 2017:45). Rather than a political strategy that identifies the institution as a "thing" to be captured, the governing infrastructure of municipalities instead becomes framed as a series of processes and social relationships to be "hacked" and opened outwards:

> For us it's more important that what takes centre stage is what's going on outside, and not our action there on the inside. (*Paola*, Ciudad Futura)

The mayor of Naples, who was *not* elected as part of a municipalist platform, suggests that these municipalist movements are thus:

> an absolute novelty in the institutional and political panorama: that between civil society, social movements and local institutions there exists a relation under construction, where each has to preserve its autonomy while building new relations and forms of participation … and new ways of working together. (De Magistris in Büllesbach et al. 2017:46)

Unlike Barcelona, Madrid or Jackson, de Magistris' mayoral candidacy in Naples originated from a conventional political party rather than from a municipalist platform. Nonetheless, Naples-based social initiatives such as Massa Critica share the emphasis on transforming the relations between the governed and those who govern, recognising this as an animating force of their project:

> We have to imagine how to change institutions, because if we think that we win and we change the world, or our country, or our city, only going to manage it—we fail … You try to change the system, or the system will destroy you. (*Luca*, Massa Critica)

We can thus make further sense of Kali Akuno's claim that "too much emphasis has been placed on electoral politics in reference to the Jackson-Kush Plan"

(quoted in Akuno and Nangwaya 2017:49). These initiatives do not measure success according to their performance in municipal elections, but on their capacity to *transform the very form* of these institutions so that they either enable or support processes of collective self-governance:

> Changing these institutions is only going to be possible if ordinary people, not career politicians, enter these spaces and in some way make politics become something much more linked to everyday life. Not with lofty speeches, with the figure of someone who's above society because they've got better tools or are better placed to represent it and take its decisions, but rather the opposite, and that's us. (*Paola*, Ciudad Futura)

> One of the things that we were really adamant about was the fact that we are not going to work as a traditional political party, the aim is not the elections, the aim is not to gain votes from people, we actually want to start from the bottom up, we want to do some work, you know? We want to start making change. (*Shameer*, Beirut Madinati)

> We feel like, guys, we were sent out like scouts, we were sent like a kind of force into this enemy territory in order to fight, in order to try to change a super complicated machine. (*Sophie*, Madrid 129)

In practice, this emphasis on transformation requires social movements to reframe their activity away from being solely confrontational towards institutions—although this remains essential—but also collaborative and generative of new governing arrangements. This understandably poses significant challenges for those coming from a history of social movement organising:

> A lot of people who were part of social movements didn't really look at you well … after, you know, when you say "no I'm part of Barcelona en Comú" and they were like "why did you do that, why do you want to be there?" (*Estela*, BComú thematic group)

> What we've started to work on now is how social movements, within the institutional arena, can avoid making a jump from thinking about social issues to political ones, avoid leaving behind the democratic, horizontal, territorial practices of social movements when we move into institutions. (*Paola*, Ciudad Futura)

The Feminisation of Politics

Taken together, this effort to pursue a politics of proximity through the transformation of institutions has begun to be referred to, by some, as the "feminisation of politics". Driven by the Spanish municipalist platforms and reiterated throughout the workshops and plenaries at Fearless Cities, the idea of feminising politics is in an early stage of being generalised across these initiatives. Nonetheless, some of the interviewees observe that the "eco-feminist approach is a fundamental part of this municipalism … putting the feminist role and ecologist approach at the core of the politics" (*Sophie*, Madrid 129).

The most visible aspect of the "feminisation of politics" is ensuring that women play a prominent role throughout leadership and representative positions: more than half the contributors at Fearless Cities were women; Coalizione Civica ensured all elected positions had a "double candidacy" with both male and

female candidates; Beirut Madinati ensured that its electoral list was half female and half male; Ciudad Futura recently run an all-female candidacy for Argentina's national deputies (which, with bitter irony, was blocked by a federal judge due to "The Female Quota Law" passed in 1991 to address gender inequality in Argentinian politics); Madrid and Barcelona have both elected female Mayors, whilst the latter has also established a Department of Life Cycles, Feminism and LGBTI which acts transversally across all the other activities of the municipality.

However, beyond the concern "for increasing presence of women in decision-making spaces and implementing public policies to promote gender equality", the concept of feminising politics is fundamentally about a challenge to "the way politics is done" (Roth and Baird 2017). Reflecting back on her introduction to the concept at Fearless Cities, *Paola* suggested that:

> When we heard the concept of the feminisation of politics we really liked it, because in some way it managed to name something that we'd been doing but hadn't known what to call it ... When we talk about feminising politics, it's a discussion about power, about how we construct a different kind of power. Not this power over someone, of oppression, but rather a power of equality, of getting things done, of cooperation, not of competition ... It managed to turn the conversation about feminism around, about the need for a society of equals where the struggle isn't anchored in the liberal, from the point of view of individual rights. Rather, it's the opposite, the idea of a model for society. (*Paola*, Ciudad Futura)

The emergence of a discourse of "feminising politics" should be read as an attempt to create a new conceptual language, a conscious effort to develop a vocabulary suitable for discussing what animates many of these municipalist initiatives. The feminisation of politics speaks to a shift away from a politics of separation—*they* govern, from afar, alienated from the everyday—towards the politics of proximity—*we* govern, in a close way, connected to the experience of the everyday. It is fundamentally a radical democratic concept, one that puts a focus on transforming *how* decision-making takes place, who has a right to speak, and how we engage with one another.

Perhaps most significant is the challenge this presents to the concept of leadership. As Ada Colau expressed, the focus of feminising politics is not to simply replace one political agent with another, but to change the very character of political agency such that:

> You can be in politics without being a strong, arrogant male, who's ultra-confident, who knows the answer to everything, had no doubts. There are other ways. I had the goal of showing that you can be in politics, aiming to win, without those characteristics, and with doubts and contradictions like normal people, and to show this and to talk about it openly. (Colau 2016)

For Caren Tepp—a councillor with Ciudad Futura—this shift in register regarding the character of political agency is to:

> end the idea that power is something that is held, disputed and exercised; battling with the image of a masculine and solitary power that can do everything, that knows everything; to question power as the logic of one's domination over others ... [To

feminise power] is not to take power but to build a new kind of power, from the bottom up, a power to do with others, a power as a creative power and collective capacity to change things. (Tepp 2018)

This emerging discourse on feminisation has striking similarities with Hardt and Negri's recent efforts to engage with (what they term) the "leadership problem" in contemporary left movements. Contrary to a political project that remains mesmerised by the "centre"—both in terms of how we organise and how we conceptualise power—they call for the practice of acting in assembly. Through building "active counterpowers" that operate as "antagonistic formations within and against the state [that push] forward real processes of social and political reform", acting in assembly is "a mechanism for composing a social alternative, for taking power differently, through cooperation in social production" (Hardt and Negri 2017:254, 295).

The new municipalist movements are, in practice, looking to form "a constitutive process that on the basis of our social wealth creates lasting institutions and organises new social relations, accompanied by the force necessary to maintain them" (Hardt and Negri 2017:295). Yet these are not processes without contradiction or without threat of institutional capture. Municipalist movements are faced with a particularly complex challenge of maintaining popular legitimacy—and defending electoral gains—without becoming enamoured with power. Whether the commitment to the *transformation of power itself* can be maintained under the weight of these contradictions remains an open question, but it is also one on which the success of these initiatives rests.

Municipalism Beyond the Local Trap

Published posthumously and in the wake of the global financial crash, Neil Smith (2015:964) argued:

> We are in a moment when the future is radically open. It is unclear what could emerge in the ashes of neoliberalism, and when that might happen ... We can be sure however that whatever new regime eventuates, it will be bound up with the production of new geographies and that a struggle over the production of new geographies is integrally a political struggle.

We live in a time when reactionary political movements are looking to mobilise particular spatial imaginaries that demarcate not only who, what and *where* has the right to govern, but who does and doesn't have the right to live. These spatial imaginaries don't simply demarcate between territories, but between those deemed worthy of being called "human"—and consequently as bearers of rights—and those downgraded to the status of "animals" and subsequently incarcerated or left to wash up on our beaches. It could not be clearer that the production of new geographies is integral to political struggle.

This paper has looked to the new municipalist movements as providing an altogether *more hopeful* politics of scale, one that that turns towards the municipality as "a more strategic front" for the organisation of progressive transformation "at this particular time and place" (Purcell 2006:1937). Crucially, this is not to fall into the trap of celebrating the municipal, city, or local as inherently more

democratic or egalitarian than other scales, providing a false hope that cities have some "*natural* urban aptitude for piecemeal and episodic collaboration" that qualifies them as the "likely building blocks for a viable global order" (Barber 2013:148, 4). On the contrary, the core argument of this paper is to demonstrate that whilst "the local trap treats localisation as an end itself … rather than as a means to an end" (Purcell 2006:1927), many of those involved within the new municipalist movements see that "municipalism is not an end in itself. It's a means by which to achieve [our] vital goals" (Roth and Baird 2017).

Although in a nascent stage and emerging in very different contexts, these new municipalist movements are not fixated on the institutions of the local state as somehow privileged agents of progressive change. On the contrary, they have begun to develop practices and theoretical perspectives that consider *what can be done* to the local state—or rather, what can be done to the municipality more broadly—to position it is as entry point for the development of a truly prefigurative and transformative social movement. Whilst we must be careful not to make hasty equations between different historical experiences, this resonates closely with Davina Cooper's (2017:351) interpretation of parts of the British Municipal Socialism in the 1980s providing:

> a productive ground from which to think about what statehood (or political governance formations) could entail; how we might imagine states taking shape in plural overlapping networks that foreground public responsibility, social justice, embeddedness, participation, stewardship, activism and creativity.

Through framing municipalism as a means rather than an end, the New Municipalist movement is working to avoid the local trap though placing "the politics of scale … centre-stage in any successful emancipatory political strategy" (Swyngedouw 1997:581). The municipalist wager is that this scale is the best place to start in developing a "decidedly scaled politics that can challenge the totalising powers of money and commodified culture and provide a credible alternative" (Swyngedouw 1997:577) through pursuing a transformative politics that engages us "in a collective and perpetual struggle to democratise our society and to manage our affairs for ourselves" (Purcell 2014:2).

For this wager to have any chance of coming off, critical researchers and activists will need to further develop alternative approaches to "the thorny issue of maintaining or consolidating local power versus the danger of incorporation and compromise at a higher scale" (Swyngedouw 1997:561). Some initial lessons have already begun to be learnt here, as movements have experienced some fundamental problems in their attempts to develop regional-wide initiatives that build on the municipalist experience. Speaking of the experiences of activists to develop regional movements in Galicia (En Marea) and Catalunya (Catalunya en Comú):

> As soon as movements look to "scale up" their politics to the regional or national level, they rapidly lose the very qualities and capacities that defined them as transformational … There are certain dynamics that start to develop once one loses the ability to work closely with other activists and start developing more hierarchical and independent structures. When municipalist movements speak of "feminizing politics", the emphasis is on fundamental changes to politics itself … It's no coincidence that as soon as one starts

trying to win in "higher" levels of government, organisations become more hierarchical, men usually take the lead, discourses become more theoretical, and urgency tends to trump the trust in collective intelligence. (Russell and Roth 2018)

In a similar attempt to "scale up" from the municipal, in October 2017 Ciudad Futura ran a slate of nine candidates to represent Santa Fe in the national election of deputies, whilst activists from A Coruña have also begun to contest the wider region. These cases provide a privileged space for learning about the possibilities —and the limitations—of a municipalist politics attempting to "jump scales". Just as we should avoid reading some inherently progressive qualities into the urban scale, so we must avoid presuming that "scaling up" a municipalist politics can amplify the transformative potential of a municipalist politics. Strategies of transformation—and efforts to "hack" the institutions of the local state—may function quite differently, or not at all, at different political scales.

Future research ought look to bring these scalar understandings to bear on existing theories of the state—especially those perspectives contained within the paradigmatic State Debate (Clarke 1991)—to aid us in developing a variegated spatial strategy of transformation. Such a strategy would take as its starting premise that "the state, then, is not just an institution. It is a form of social relations, a class practice. More precisely, it is a process which projects certain forms of organisation upon our everyday activity" (London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979), and look to understand what strategies of transformation may be effective and *complimentary* at different scales. Not only do these new municipal movements provide us with an empirical window onto the possibility (or lack thereof) of transforming the social relationships that compose the state—developing a more practice based understanding of the complexities of being "in, against and beyond" capitalism (see Cumbers 2015; Featherstone et al. 2015)—they provide us with the opportunity to insert scale into the centre of these debates. Whilst critical geographical research on the politics of scale remains essential to understanding contemporary political phenomena, these insights are all the more valuable to those looking to organise effective democratic and egalitarian transformation.

Endnote

[1] The conference was hosted at De Montfort University in Leicester, and was organised by the Centre for Urban Research on Austerity. A blog summarising some of the key debates can be found here: http://urbaninstitute.group.shef.ac.uk/municipal-what-reflections-on-municipalsocialism-in-the-21st-century/ (last accessed 8 January 2019).

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