**European Perspectives on the Progressive City and Other Municipal Reform Approaches.**

ACSP Annual Conference, Miami, Florida, 21 October 2021.

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*Draft Only.*

*Not for Citation.*

**Introduction**

Perhaps the most important thing to say about the difference between progressive municipal reform movements in Europe in the twentieth century compared to those in the United States is that the election of progressives in sufficient numbers to control town halls in cities across Europe was largely the consequence of the electoral success of the first socialist and communist parties in the period immediately prior to and following the First World War. The struggle for local representation and for working class suffrage was bound up with wider struggles for emancipation and resistance to attacks on wages and working conditions as a result of the long international depression of the 1890s and early twentieth century such that, as Patrick Le Galès writes “…the institutional response to globalisation has to be studied on the biggest of canvasses, that of the long history of the European city (Le Galès, 2002 in Ewen & Hebbert 2007, 327).

Patrizia Dogliani points to the founding of the Union Internationale des Villes/International Union of Local Authorities (UIV/IULA) in 1913, an organisation in which “Belgian, French, Dutch and English socialist leaders remained strongly influential in this federation between the two world wars, working in connection with co-operative movements and the International Labour Office based in Geneva” (Dogliani 2002). As early as 1881 the French socialists took control of the French district of Montmartre, and by 1892 they controlled no fewer than seventy communes across France. In 1888, the Italian socialists won their first communal victory at Imola, just a short journey from Bologna which was to become the most important and well-known of Italy’s ‘red cities’ in the subsequent century. The great Emilian socialist and former anarchist, Andrea Costa, was in regular correspondence with his French equivalent Paul Brousse who was keen to organise a conference for representatives from France, Spain, Italy and England, with a varied agenda including a preliminary proposal to initiate public services and works, some of which should be road schemes because 'this may contribute to the union of peoples’ (Dogliani 2002, 575).”

In England, the president of the Social Democratic Federation, H. M. Hyndman, had authored *A Commune for London* in 1887, which anticipated the foundation of what was to become the London County Council (LCC) just a few years later in 1889. Hyndman’s proposal for a “Great Council which would co-ordinate services in the capital, a proposal that was subsequently adopted and elaborated by the Fabians in the Fabian Tracts” (ibid, 575) although it was not until 1934 that the Labour Party, which the Webbs and other leading Fabians helped to launch in 1918, was able to take control of the LCC.

While it could be best be described as “progressive” rather than “socialist” in its first three decades, the newly created LCC sought to challenge the monopoly cartel of private builders who set high prices for clients while keeping labour costs at barely subsistence level;

one of its first resolutions required contractors to submit tenders for Council work that were based on trade union wages. But the Council soon went further, resolving in 1892 to establish its own works department. Its early responsibility for the fire service, street improvements, bridges, tunnels, city parks and worker housing created strong incentives to establish a permanent in-house building operation to carry out new construction work and repairs and maintenance. All rejected cost as the sole criterion in awarding building contracts.

As Leopold and McDonald go on to argue

These ideas, in their earliest form, did not derive exclusively from party political platforms but emerged from loose associations of trade unionists, London MPs and middle-class intellectuals, who became active in organisations such as the London Municipal Reform League (Leopold & McDonald, 2012, 1843).

After winning power in a few small communes outside Brussels and some industrial towns, in the 1898 and 1903 elections, the number of socialist-controlled communes in Belgium included Ixelles, Saint Gilles, Anderlecht, Seraing and Schaerbeek which “became testing grounds for new municipal policies” (ibid.). Elected politicians from municipalities like Glasgow, Birmingham, Helsinki, and Frankfurt visited each other's town halls to study problems and debate policy, most evident in John Nettlefold's visits to study German city planning for Birmingham City Council in 1905 (Ewen & Hebbert 2005, 292-293). Professional officers and city bureaucrats in areas like fire protection and public health traded technical knowledge and technological innovations at international meetings like the 1903 International Fire Brigades Congress in London, as well as through more conventional routes such as trades publications and private correspondence (Ewen & Hebbert, 2005).

Municipal socialism even found adherents in the USA. But here pioneers were planning cities from scratch on green-field sites, they were not bureaucrats taking defensive action to mitigate epidemics, overcrowding and outdated infrastructure. And Americans were more likely to be advocates of competitive capitalism than of socialism. The profound contrast between the two countries did nothing however to diminish American interest in Britain’s experiments, a testament to the powerful appeal of local provision at the time, and an indicator of the potential influence that localised forms of socialism might continue to have today. (Leopold & McDonald, 2012, 1839).

What is clear from their early election manifestos and campaign materials was that the first European socialist and workers’ parties saw ‘municipalism’ not so much as end in itself but as a way of “meeting the immediate needs of the proletarian masses: education, hygiene and medical care (especially for the weaker members of society - children, mothers and the aged), housing, and the distribution of food, clothing and medicine (Dogliani 2002, 576).”

In other words, the local state was regarded both as a stepping stone to institutional power at the level of the national state, but also as a mechanism for implementing the type of welfarism and social protection that trade unionists had been demanding for several decades, and which had increasingly become incorporated into strike demands across Europe. In the case of the early Labour Party in East London districts such as Poplar, the municipal reformers were also looking to expand the services of the borough in order to provide more secure and better paid employment for a highly casualised and poorly paid work force, and to use the local property tax system in order to promote some modest redistribution from the better off to those in desperate need of social assistance. This was a policy which the courts immediately declared to be illegal, and which ultimately led to the jailing of the councillors who refused to reverse the rate rise (Branson, 1979).

First wave municipalism represented an attempt, in Polanyian terms, to use the local state as a force for re-embedding the market into the social and often against the grain of disembedding national capitalist state interventions that were to lead to the Great Depression of the 1930s on both sides of the Atlantic, and to mass unemployment and social suffering which particularly struck poor urban communities.

**From Reconstruction to the New Urban Left**

In the period after the Second World, the legacy of anti-fascism provided a spur to a second wave of socialist municipalism especially where socialists and communists had been part of national liberation governments such as in France and Italy. While on the other side of the iron curtain ‘actually existing socialist’ states began the process of urban reconstruction without the constraints of the invisible hand of the market, but wary of allowing popular participation to challenge the orthodoxy of centralist planning through essentially similar versions of the orthodox Marxist-Leninist party model – with the possible exception of Yugoslavia (Simmie 1989).

Meanwhile, often governing in coalition with their socialist allies, Eurocommunist parties such as the Italian PCI were keen to show how cities that they led such as Bologna in the red region of Emilia-Romagna could be innovative in terms of participatory planning, pre-school education, care for the elderly, affordable and efficient transportation and even regional economic investment to the extent that ‘new left’ administrations such as the GLC under Ken Livingstone were keen to emulate this electorally attractive mix of city-regional planning, cooperativism and publicly funded infrastructure and cultural experimentation and internationalism, albeit with much more mixed results (Mackintosh and Wainright 1987).

In Scandianvia, where the national political consensus remained broadly social democratic in a tradition that had continued from at least the 1920s, city administrations used their budgets and planning powers to advance an idea of the public good built around high welfare and educational standards as well as an investment in modernist social housing projects that were envied by many other European cities and in some cases emulated. The ‘Swedish model’, which included setting up and expanding the role of municipal housing companies, and providing housing of different types and for most types of households, allowed Sweden to avoid a residual social housing system (Andersson 2006, 788). This was made easier because there was much more integration between central and local government in terms of the Swedish welfare model that also included input from trade unions, tenants and other collective actors. In Germany, despite the change of government at federal level there was administrative continuity in the Ruhr-Rhine industrial belt regions and larger cities like Berlin and Hamburg such that again city mayors were often working with the grain of the regional administrations that were often governed by the same party – usually the SPD – if sometimes in coalition with the Liberals and/or the Greens. This meant that urban policy targeting inequality or homelessness or integration of immigrant workers from Turkey and other European countries could be pursued in a much more joined up way through the regional and city administrations (which in the case of the city states were one and the same thing).

As a consequence there was much less of an obvious contrast between city leaderships in Nordic Europe and Northern European countries with strong welfare models such as Germany, Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg for most of the twentieth century. It is really only with the rise of far-right parties and the move of the centre-right parties to more explicitly anti-immigrant positions that the national political space begins to shift decisively away from the liberal multiculturalist consensus that dominated urban politics in the post-68 period where many of that student generation entered professional politics through the corridors of municipal administrations in their home cities. Indeed because territorial politics continues to be an important source of political legitimacy for politicians in many European polities, it is much more typical for city hall to be the route to national power in Western continental Europe than it would be in the UK or even the US.

What seemed to characterise the ‘new urban left municipalism’ of the 1980s in the UK – and there were echoes of this also in some US cities such as Cleveland and Chicago - as Pierre Clavel has documented, is a greater attention to gender and racial inequality, gay and lesbian liberation (leading later to a recognition of the need to end the marginalisation of the entire LGBTQ+ movement), the question of disability and disabled urban residents, the position of children and young people as well as other vulnerable social groups such as the homeless, the elderly, those with substance addiction problems and so forth. Broadly speaking, the new municipal left that began to assume control of major cities such as London and Sheffield and Liverpool in the 1980s when the Thatcher administration was at the height of its powers, saw the local state as an opportunity to bring together these diverse social movements sometimes literally under the roof of County Hall while using the staff and financial resources of the GLC to launch and sustain local grass roots organisations and cooperatives. This was seen as part of a broader counter-cultural politics aimed at challenging and ultimately overturning what Stuart Hall referred to as the ‘authoritarian populism’ of the Thatcher state with a left populism (Hatherley 2020) that was rooted in policies such as ‘fares fair’ – in which the GLC rate supplement levied on all London boroughs would be partially diverted to reducing bus and tube fairs across London – with more than a hint to the transport policy of Red Bologna (Parker, 1992) as well as the ‘right to the study’ manifesto of French radical social theorists such as Henri Lefebvre.

**New Municipalism and The ‘Post-Neoliberal City’.**

In 2017 Barcelona hosted the first international gathering of the Fearless Cities network – the ‘coming out party’ for a so-called ‘new municipalism’ (Russell, 2019: 2) – drawing together around 700 participants and 100 citizen platforms from 180 cities and 40 countries, aiming to democratically transform cities to resist growing inequalities, democratic deficits and social injustices (Barcelona en Comu et al., 2019) (Thompson 2020, 2).

Despite internal variegation, Thompson argues that new municipalists are united by two distinct features: first, harnessing the urban or municipal scale to achieve strategic ends which – secondly – vary from ‘pragmatic’ (Aldag et al., 2019) and ‘entrepreneurial’ (Thompson et al., 2020) municipalisms, representing more constrained, reactive responses to neoliberal austerity urbanism, to more proactive, contentious, expansive programmes for transformation of state/capitalist social relations, inspired by Bookchin’s (2014) anarcho-eco-socialist vision for ‘libertarian municipalism’ (Carson, 2017 cited in Thompson 2020, 2).

Experiments in new municipalism in the period since the 2008 crash have often been designed to respond to the crisis and failure of neoliberalism at the local level in terms of issues such as

* a lack of employment and the way that this is often racially and socially manifested within already struggling communities
* crime and policing
* housing need
* health and social care
* accessibility of services and urban space
* the environment and issues such as noise and air quality

In the UK, there has also been a strong interest in community wealth building as a response to the de-localising impact of globalisation, with a focus on so-called ‘anchor institutions’ such as universities, hospitals and local government itself – all of which are often major employers and consumers of local services. Through recruiting such institutions to policy objectives such as ‘living wage’ campaigns the idea is to create a snowball effect with other local employers so that ‘decent work’ becomes a normal expectation rather than an opportunity that only those lucky enough to work in certain public sectors enjoy (bearing in mind that some of the lowest paid jobs are still to be found in publicly funded social care).

Interestingly the ‘Preston Model’ of community wealth building shares many features of the first wave of municipalist internationalism such as the Union Internationale des Villes because the initial funding for its first foray into progressive procurement policies came in 2015 from the European Union’s URBACT III Procure Programme rather than from UK central government funding. By 2019 Preston was working with We are now working with over 20 councils and numerous anchor

institutions across the UK to develop community wealth building approaches.

The idea behind community wealth building is essentially very simple. It takes a broadly Keynesian approach in order to avoid money that is spent locally by businesses and residents ‘leaking’ to large, often foreign owned multinationals or other non-locally based suppliers of goods and services so that a greater proportion of what is earned and spent locally can be recycled into the local economy thus maintaining demand for local goods and services. The basic assumption is that ‘small enterprises, community organisations, cooperatives and forms of municipal ownership are more economically generative for the local economy, than large or public limited companies’ (CLES 2019). In this respect it shares many common features with the Emilian model that the PCI developed in the 1950s and 1960s as a way of building alliances with small business owners and farmers.

Barcelona’s aspirations under the auspices of the En Comú group lead by Ada Colau seem to put more stress on human rights and international solidarity. But there is a good deal of interest in improving community participation in decision making which shares features with progressive governments in Latin America – especially around the participatory budget movement which had its origin in Brazil. The network of authorities that form part of the Fearless Cities network – at which Pierre Clavel spoke recently – are part of what they describe as a Global Municipalist Movement. The eponymous book put together by En Comú and Debbie Bookchin (the daughter of two distinguished radical urbanists – Beatrice Bookchin who ran for the city council in Burlington, Vermont of Bernie Sanders fame and Murray Bookchin, the noted social theorist and libertarian) is the result of over 144 contributors from 54 towns and cities, the majority of them women authors – and it is clear that even in the few years since its inception in 2017 that the *Fearless Cities* network is building momentum and stimulating interest for its programme. Taking inspiration from her father’s libertarian municipalism, Debbie Bookchin refers to the long history of citizen self-government that inspired it: ‘from Athens [in Ancient Greece], to the Paris Commune, to the Anarchist collectives of Spain in 1936, to Chiapas, Mexico, to Barcelona and other Spanish cities and towns in recent years, and now to Rojava, in Syria, where the Kurdish people have implemented a profoundly democratic project of self-rule unlike anything ever seen in the Middle East.’ It is not too surprising that these ideas found a welcome in the city which was at the epicentre of the Spanish anarchist resistance to fascism, and where the wider Catalan struggle for autonomy and independence from Madrid continues to divide the territory as well as the socialist and progressive movement.

This could be broadly summarised as follows:

* strong rejection of central state bureaucracy
* a minimum programme that would include - ending home foreclosures [the repossession of mortgaged homes by banks], stopping escalating rents and the destabilization of neighbourhoods through gentrification.
* decentralising the decision making process to the neigbourhood level through the use of assemblies
* ensuring that under-represented groups that are often locked out of formal politics, such as women and ethnic and other minorities, are fully represented in deliberative forums

Many of these progressive demands have found echoes in successful campaigns for the rights of ordinary urban residents on both sides of the Atlantic – from rent control campaigns in New York in the 1970s to a more recent and successful campaign in Berlin that has significantly pushed back the advance of private landlord profiteering in the rental sector and the speculative overseas property investment that was leading to the rapid gentrification of the central districts of the former East Berlin. Indeed Ada Colau’s own rise to power in Barcelona came on the back of the anti-foreclosure campaigns which she was involved in coordinating in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis which had a huge impact on Spain’s economy, but helped to revive the moribund Spanish left as a result of organised local struggles to prevent evictions, redundancies and cuts to public services. In other words NM is a good example of how on both sides of the Atlantic campaigns for social and racial justice, with the right coalition of political actors, can be translated into institutional power at local level. But as with previous waves of municipalism the challenge is always holding these coalitions together and sustaining the enthusiasm of traditionally excluded and non-activist publics beyond the first term of office.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have identified four waves of municipalism that could be said to have broadly progressive characteristics. The first wave was associated with state building and working class emancipation, it was characterised by a strong internationalism and pacifism but also what we might call ‘gas and water’ socialism characteristics that sought to replace fragmentary, corrupt and exploitative private provision of essential services with publicly owned and regulated utilities, and later housing and transport.

In the second wave of European municipalism after 1945 we saw a more confident and assertive variety of municipalism bolstered by the strong presence of communist parties and other left parties in national liberation struggles. Despite the rapid encroachment of the Cold War which effectively delegitimised the communist presence in national government in Italy and France, and which led to an outright ban of the KPD in Germany, at a regional and local level, communist parties – often in association with allied socialist and other progressive parties - controlled large city authorities and parts of metropolitan regions well into the 1970s. In these ‘red islands’, an ecology that could be best described in Gramscian terms as counter-hegemonic was constructed over the course of several decades that went beyond far beyond city hall itself to include the trade union and cooperative movement, as well as social movements ranging from internationally oriented campaigns against the nuclear arms race and the war in Vietnam and specific anti-colonial struggles (notably Algeria in the case of France) to more localised campaigns around industrial disputes, anti-racism, housing equity, education reform, women’s rights, and so forth.

The third wave of municipalism was very much a reaction to the neoliberal assault on the Keynesian welfare state of the Thatcher-Reagan era and was more defensive in nature. It tended to include campaigns against, for example, the privatisation of transport and public utilities and the sale of public housing, as well as resistance to central government attacks on public finance and heavy controls on how local authorities were able to spend their money. The neoliberal advance of the 1980s and 1990s was particularly acute and successful in the UK and USA but it did have echoes in continental Europe, where Green parties were beginning to supplant the communist left as the alternative model to growth coalitions based on market fundamentalism in many parts of Europe, especially in the low countries and Germany during this period. At the same time, while defensive municipalism was often defeated due to the left’s incapacity to compete for and win power on the national scale, it did begin to institutionalise some of the radical social movement agenda from what we could call ‘the long 68’, which included inclusive employment practices that favoured minorities and discriminated groups, it led to more accountability from state agencies such as the police, it allowed many not for profit ad hoc projects to be properly funded and in turn enabled community activists to actually make a career out of community organising.

Finally, the fourth wave that we have witnessed since the financial crash of 2008 is often referred to as ‘new municipalism’, although many of its features are familiar to us from even first wave municipalism. Here again I would argue that NM is responding to the crisis of capitalism and the hollowing out of the remnants of the welfare state, but this time by providing solutions in the form of community wealth building projects that really emphasises the “DIY” approach to capitalist market failure reminiscent of the “start-up” culture which young millennials have been forced to embrace in the absence of secure, well paid corporate jobs. New municipalism tends to be much more diverse in terms of leadership and key actors than its predecessors (although not everywhere) with women playing prominent roles in civic leadership, it is much more horizontalist and decentralised in terms of policy making and deliberative structures – revealing a clear break with the older style Marxist party tradition that even defined the New Left well into the 1980s and 1990s, it is certainly internationalist and in that sense challenging of nation-state obsessions with bordering and immigration control, and as a result makes common cause with initiatives such as the sanctuary cities movement. Finally, the NM movement is not afraid to talk in terms of the need for system change both in terms of how we run the global economy especially in and through the majority urban world, and connectedly, how the climate emergency must be declared and acknowledged and understood as part of a common commitment to put the needs of people and planet before profit and non-community wealth.

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