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Re-empowering the local: new municipal alternatives

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In the wake of the crushing political defeat that was the December UK general election, many people are - unsurprisingly - looking for resources of hope. One of these resources is municipalism. This is in part because of its revitalisation and role in creating progressive political change over the past few years, as the power of local forms of government has been increasingly mobilised to create left political provision. As with previous local political interventions, these initiatives have had significant broader political effects. They have also functioned to demonstrate some of the ways in which left alternatives are related to a renewal of public ownership, which has been a cornerstone of Labour's recent policies.

One of the most inspiring and increasingly well-known examples in the UK is the extremely successful left municipal strategy of Preston council. Preston has used the public procurement powers at its disposal to contract local suppliers and organisations, helping the regeneration of its high streets and market as well as local livelihoods; it has given direct support to co-operatives; and it is making plans with nearby councils to create a people's bank for the north west. This has taken place in a context where, despite a governmental rhetoric of localism, the powers of local government have been significantly curtailed and councils are struggling to deal with the harsh realities of austerity and ongoing cuts. What is significant about examples like this is the way in which they represent a revitalisation of the political imagination. They also suggest a growing confidence that alternatives can be shaped from particular places and contexts, and a willingness to break with some of the neoliberal political timidity that characterised 'third way' politics.

The Preston example points to some of the other reasons why municipalism is attractive in the current conjuncture. Municipalism has the capacity to extend democracy on the ground in areas where several decades of neoliberalism and de-democratisation had pummelled it. It has the potential to re-empower localities: to involve diverse people in decision-making about their lives. This is a marked contrast to longstanding practices such as political candidates being parachuted in by central command, and industry and jobs being farmed out to exploitative multinational corporations. And it offers the possibility of engaging with different forms of public ownership that are more embedded in, and responsive to, local contexts, and represent a break from the top-down forms of public-ownership associated with the post-war nationalisations.¹

Such forms of local democratisation are particularly salient given the loss of the 'red wall'. To a significant extent, the election result happened because of people in the regions losing faith in any kind of left or centrist ideals (for, crucially, this was a defeat, we should note, not only of the left, but also of the centre-left and the centre), and being relentlessly targeted by a right-wing populist message of 'taking back control'. The legacy of a disenfranchised localism is only too painfully apparent all around us in the social wreckage of an invigorated right-wing populism. Left municipalism seems to offer a convincing alternative to a descent into disaster capitalism, one that addresses the causes of the defeat and offers solutions.

¹ Andrew Cumbers *Reclaiming Public Ownership: Making Space for Economic Democracy* London Zed Books, 2012.

Political projects informed by left municipalism are having significant traction in a range of different places beyond the UK. In his contribution here Óscar Garcia Agustin discusses recent forms of new municipalism in Spain, which have been particularly significant in Barcelona. He contends that these movements are making a crucial contribution to our understanding of the strengths and shortcomings of building a local progressive project, and are offering new ways of formalising ‘the solidarity relations which connect civil society, institutions and cities’. This points to the potential of left municipalism to extend non-capitalist forms and re-empower the commons by boosting co-operatives; and to improve employee rights by bringing workers back in-house in the form of insourcing, after decades of outsourcing. This return to insourcing, also known as ‘remunicipalism’, has had a significant number of victories in a range of places in Britain, from towns to cities, from councils to universities. It is important to note, however, that such alternatives can face push-back and hostility, a key example here being Conservative pressure against councils supporting the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement in procurement.²

Remunicipalism, like the new municipalism, is not confined to the UK. In South Africa a key demand of the #RhodesMustFall movement was bringing cleaners and catering staff back in-house in order to vastly improve their rights as workers, from holiday rights to sick pay. Municipalisms in Latin America has for a long time served as an angry and practical rejoinder to the shock doctrine policies of the Washington Consensus. The innovations of Barcelona en Comú (Barcelona in Common) in providing forms of localised socialism including innovative internet provision - aka platform co-operativism - have been widely fêted. International co-operation and information-sharing have also occurred, through spaces such as the ‘Fearless Cities’ summit and the *Atlas of Change* discussed by Agustin.

In this issue of *Soundings* we approach the existence and the potential of the new municipalism in a variety of ways. We place it in historical context, considering how the new municipalism relates to older examples, including the innovative experience of the Greater London Council (GLC). Hilary Wainwright talks about what it was like to create left municipal politics at the 1980s GLC, and of being inspired by the ‘prefigurative politics’ of the women’s movement and Italian politics; she also describes how the GLC attempted to empower co-operatives and local communities (such as Coin Street) and introduce ethical procurement policies. The great success of the GLC in affecting the wider life and institutions around it is analysed by Kathy Williams, who shows what a profound impact it had at the Southbank Centre: transforming this arts space from elitist haven to democratic palace of the people through its ‘open foyer’ policy, the legacies of which carry to this day. Williams notes that these legacies are largely obscured in the contemporary institution but argues that they need to be remembered and revalorised as an example of what progressive arts can involve.

Of course, not everything municipal is or was rosy, and both Williams and Wainwright are alert to that fact. Wainwright highlights the extent of the power of the GLC compared to the reduced power of present-day councils. Williams urges us not to think everything was perfect at the GLC, when while presenting it as an inspiring example. There is a similar vein of constructive criticism in the other articles. In their expansive contextual analysis of the new municipalism, Andy Cumbers and Franziska Paul offer a range of questions and provocations alongside an incisive survey of the new municipal field. They show how municipal politics

² Davina Cooper and Didi Herman ‘Doing activism like a state: Progressive municipal government, Israel/Palestine and BDS’ *Environment and Planning C*, 38: 1, 2020, 40-59.

can be right-wing and neoliberal as well as left-wing, flagging up Victor Orban's far right use of remunicipalism in Hungary, and emphasising the importance of local specificity.

Cumbers and Paul point out that it is not only the 'fearless cities' - the successful radical flagships of the new municipalism - that we need to pay attention to; we also need to be aware of the potential of 'mundane localisms in less celebrated spaces', and indeed the *fearful* cities and towns where conservative localist projects have taken hold. Their arguments mesh in important ways with Agustin's focus on how municipalism can shape articulations of 'progressive localism', and his focus on the forms of translocal solidarities that can be created through municipal politics. Abigail Gilbert, who has been working on municipal strategy in Barking and Dagenham, takes up this challenge and argues that left municipalism is a way to address localised forms of racism and racialised tension, and to find inclusive forms of belonging at the local level. Related to this, Agustin's contribution draws attention to the ways in which strategies such as making Barcelona a 'Refuge City' have helped develop particular forms of translocal solidarity.

The geographical frame is extended by the conversation between Leoluca Orlando, the Mayor of Palermo, and Tunç Soyer, the Mayor of Izmir, in conjunction with their interviewer, the philosopher and transnational activist Lorenzo Marsili. This discussion foregrounds the issues of migration and climate crisis and argues that cities have a crucial role to play in addressing these global challenges. This article is also part of our Soundings series 'Other Europes'.

Finally, Bertie Russell offers us a rich analysis of municipal politics, and grounds this with specific proposals about how such alternatives might be developed in Manchester. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's influential arguments about the Right to the City, he outlines a five-point agenda for future articulations of new municipalism, which usefully maps out key challenges and possibilities for such political interventions. In this sense - and drawing on Russell's work as well as other pieces in the issue - if the local/municipal is going to be a key terrain of struggle over the coming years, then we suggest the following core issues are particularly significant ones to engage with.

Firstly, it is important to strengthen the links between forms of new municipal politics, and articulate them in ways which speak to a broad progressive left agenda. This is a crucial challenge and important consideration, given that engaging with the local, as Doreen Massey often argued, does not by itself signify any particular political stance. Rather, the local can be envisioned as an integral part of contrasting political projects and usages. In this sense, as Russell suggests, it is important to signal that the new municipalism does not imply a turning 'inwards' but rather an engagement with the different terms on which places are shaped and the ways in which relations beyond them are constructed.

Secondly, and building on this first point, a crucial way in which progressive localisms can be articulated is through making positive connections with other struggles and projects, rather than positioning localist politics as defensive. It is also important to challenge accounts of the local based on assumptions about homogeneity, or use such organising as part of reactionary or exclusionary discourses. In other words it is important to consider, as Abigail Gilbert does here, how municipal alternatives can draw on and engage with the diversity that is integral to particular places.

Thirdly, it is important not to construct the local in isolation, and to avoid fetishising one scale of politics. A frustrating aspect of the post-election debate in this respect has been a sense that Labour needs to orient to *either* towns *or* cities.³ The ways in which towns and cities have been counterposed is unhelpful, and forecloses the possibility of thinking about ways of building alliances and left political projects across them. We need to think about how the left adopts imaginaries that enable connections to be built across geographical divisions, rather than organising in ways which entrench them.

Finally, one of the aspects of the new municipalism that has been most inspiring has been the ambition and political possibilities it has opened up. Given the dominance of rather quiescent forms of local politics in the face of austerity, this offers the possibility of a transformation in the political landscape- something that is particularly important given the entrenchment of the most right-wing government in the UK since Thatcher. The formation of vibrant local left alternatives could play a central role in challenging this reactionary political project, while the potential of making translocal connections offers further important ways of renewing left solidarities and imaginaries in the current political conjuncture.

The issue concludes with a number of articles that are not part of the themed section. As a contribution to our ‘Conversations with Stuart Hall’ series, in partnership with the Stuart Hall Foundation, Jack Shenker explores what it’s like to live through the unravelling of a political settlement through a discussion of how it has marked the lives of two young people, one in Cairo and one in Greater Manchester. Each continues, despite everything, to believe in politics. As Shenker argues, the current landscape of political struggle contains both emancipatory and deeply revanchist possibilities.

John Clarke discusses some of the complex causes of the 2019 Conservative election victory. He argues that, rather than blaming Brexit or Jeremy Corbyn, we need to attend to multiple causes, including those working across the widely differing timescales that came together to constitute the particular moment of the election. These include the long trajectory of deindustrialisation and financialisation, the legacies of Empire, and the changing nature of class in the UK. Thinking in this way enables us to see the election as part of a wider conjuncture, and it also allows us to think about the contingent political bloc assembled around ‘Brexit and Boris’. Perhaps most importantly, it helps us to discover its potential lines of fracture and failure.

We conclude with an extensive interview with Michael Rustin, who reflects on his long life in the New Left, which began when he was still at school and continues more than sixty years later, including through his central involvement in *Soundings*. Michael describes the history of the First New Left, with whom he was closely involved, both as a student in Oxford and, later, in London, as one of the group that produced the *May Day Manifesto*. He also discusses the founding of *New Left Review*, and the time of transition from its first editor, Stuart Hall, to its second, Perry Anderson, as well as his continuing disagreements and agreements with

³ For example, some of the rhetoric from Lisa Nandy’s leadership election campaign; see <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/03/labour-power-activism-leader> .

the journal's editorial direction. His reflections on contemporary politics include a discussion of the relationship of New Left ideas to current movements and the Labour Party, a critique of vanguardism, and the founding of *Soundings*.