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New municipalism as space for solidarity

Óscar García Agustín

How can new municipalism develop a progressive localism and forge translocal solidarities?

On 26 May 2019 Spain held simultaneous European Parliament, municipal and regional elections. This confluence created, at least electorally, a connection between local and European levels. Unidas Podemos, the coalition between Podemos and the United Left, organised campaign events with the participation of their European Parliament as well as local candidates (either belonging to or associated with the party). In Barcelona, María Eugenia Rodríguez Palop, the head of the Unidas Podemos list for the European Parliament, participated in an event with Ada Colau, the leader of Barcelona en Comú, who was running to secure another term in the Mayor's office. Rodríguez Palop highlighted the main achievements of Colau's first term (among others, promoting public policies on water, transport and energy for the common good, and fighting against speculation and excessive levels of tourism). He concluded that: 'We are going to reproduce all these [measures] in Europe, because the goal is that we are going to put in practice everything we have learnt during these four years from Barcelona en Comú, when we win Europe for its people.'¹ Colau underlined that Barcelona en Comú is, above all, a citizens' candidature, gathering together a plurality of people who wanted to decide what the future of city they live in should be. However, because of the simultaneous elections, she argued that Barcelona had become an international reference of hope. This meant that the city should take on a further responsibility: 'to forge international solidarity networks to shape a new republican, feminist and democratising union which defends human rights and social justice against hatred'.

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The views expressed by Rodríguez Palop and Colau are complementary, but they also raise important questions about municipalism: how can the municipalist experience be translated to the transnational scale? And how can municipalism contribute to shaping translocal solidarity by connecting networks of cities? The distinction between these two questions is not minor: whilst the first question points to a scaling-up of municipalism to reproduce it at the transnational level (the EU), the second question is about reinforcing the role of the cities as an important dimension of multi-level governance. In other words, municipalism is a model to be reproduced at other scales or a model to be produced by connecting local scales. Since Ada Colau first became Mayor in 2015, Barcelona en Comú has promoted the importance of the local level, while at the same time maintaining its international commitment and searching for a space for municipalism at the national scale and within the Spanish state.

The results of the 2019 European elections were disappointing. Podemos had started its breakthrough as political party in 2014, when, in what was at that time a considerable surprise, five of its candidates were elected as MEPs. The coalition with United Left (who won six seats in the 2014 elections) did not lead to a remarkable increase in 2019: together they won only six seats. The municipal results were not much better. The 'governments of change' lost the elections, with the exception of Cadiz. The City Council in Madrid was a dramatic loss since it was defeated by a centre-right coalition supported by the far-right party Vox; Barcelona en Comú kept their leadership of the city thanks to the support of the social democratic PSC (the Catalan branch of PSOE) and the support of the social liberal candidate Manuel Valls (who had been prime minister of France (2014-16) during the presidency of François Hollande).

This situation generates uncertainty about the strength and potential for municipalism and reminds us that, despite being rooted in local spatial practices and proximity to ordinary people, municipalism is not exempt from electoral logic. But in spite of these ups and downs, new municipalism in Spain, particularly in Barcelona, is making a crucial contribution to our understanding of the strengths and shortcomings of building a local progressive project through formalising the solidarity relations which connect civil society, institutions and cities. In this article I will consider municipalism as a form of progressive localism, which on the one hand connects the local and the global through translocal solidarity, and on the other

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scales-up and becomes an alternative way of doing politics beyond the state.

Municipalism and solidarity

The social and political events of 2015 created a structure of opportunity for the emergence and development of new municipalism in Spain. Three events help to understand the subsequent centrality of cities as sites to govern and set up a progressive agenda. Firstly, Podemos became the third most popular party and made evident the crisis of the two-party system, built around the centre-left vs centre right axis. Considered by many as the institutional development of the 15M movement, Podemos adopted innovative organisational forms that were open to participation, and a clear orientation towards horizontal politics.² However, following its successes in 2014, Podemos decided not to directly contest the municipal elections in May 2015 and instead to focus on the general election later in the year. Despite the tensions and disagreements this generated, the will of Podemos to become a national (and partly regional) party, with the aim of governing the country, opened up the space for the shaping of new municipal candidatures. Secondly, citizens' candidatures in many cities connected with the spirit of the 15M, but - in contrast to Podemos - they linked their practices and organisations directly with the movement of the squares. The citizens' candidatures related to a context in which there was the possibility of constituting a local progressive movement, detached from national parties, and of prioritising the municipality as the main scale of politics. Moreover, the candidatures shared enough commonalities to be perceived as a broader response to the political and economic crisis. Thirdly, the so-called 'refugee crisis' provoked a wave of solidarity among civil society actors. Citizens expressed their discontent with the EU's inability to coordinate a common response, and with the national government's reluctance, in most cases, to facilitate the reception of refugees. Whilst politicians competed to receive the least number of refugees possible, citizens reclaimed the cities as spaces of welcome as well as of solutions. Civil society organised beyond the logics of the state and forged translocal solidarities.

Thus, an incipient municipalism was born, facing a number of challenges and expectations: in particular, the development of an autonomous space of organisation and government, including civil society; the redefinition of the relationship between

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city and state politics; and the forging of translocal bonds to move towards multi-level governance.

Progressive localism

Localism, in itself, does not necessarily imply space for progressive politics. The idea of privileging the city as site of proximity between citizens' everyday practices and their institutions can hide a conservative agenda - for example through the construction of imagined homogenous cultural communities, opposition to the state, and the invocation to restructure the public sector. In contrast to this 'austerity localism', 'progressive localism' consists of 'the many traditions of place-based political activity and struggle that challenge the associations of localism with political passivity'.³ Progressive localism is thus a place-based organising form that aims to shape localisms in contested and solidaristic ways, and to link place-based politics and global processes.

Municipalism is a form of progressive localism in which city councils act institutionally, in cooperation with civil society. Urban movements and activists contribute to such a progressive vision, but municipalities are also at the mercy of neoliberal policies at the national level. We must not forget that the successful results of citizens' candidatures in Spain in 2015 can be seen as representing a re-territorialisation of municipal power. For, while the 15M movement was capable of mobilising and making their demands heard during the campaign for the municipal and regional elections of May 2011, the results had given the Popular Party enormous territorial power. Some mainstream media voices consequently argued that citizens had turned their back on the movements, or that the indignados had just ignored the elections since politicians did not represent them. The victory of the PP in the national elections held later in the year, in November 2011, underscored further the idea of a divorce between civil society and politicians, or the lack of direct political impact of the indignados movements. During the years that followed, however, while Podemos was developing its national project, place-based organisations - which were developing a socio-spatial justice agenda and claiming the right to the city - found the possibility of shaping a progressive localism in the municipal elections. This was their response to the implementation of austerity politics, and a reaffirmation of the city as place to do politics.

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When municipalism branded itself as ‘governments of change’, as a collective project localised in several municipalities, it showed its intention to re-territorialise power differently. ‘Change’ here refers not simply to replacing the former leaderships of local authorities but, more ambitiously, to modifying ways of doing politics. The role played by political parties is questioned because of their rigidity and dependence on national politics. The citizens’ candidatures attempted to move towards a hybrid form of organisation - composed of political parties, social movements and activists - and towards a local organisation which is not considered as a local branch of a national party. The implementation of municipalism offers an alternative in face of the crisis of legitimacy of traditional parties, by consolidating progressive localism.⁴ The new municipalism thus faced a dual challenge: the politicisation of the local level, involving a redefinition of community and a reconsideration of the relationship between the public and the private; and the creation of new social imaginations capable of connecting alternative geographies. In response to this challenge, municipalism emphasises a community based in everyday practices, and seeks to avoid reproducing locally the separation between nationals and outsiders; and it also focuses on the re-municipalisation of public services, quite often associated with the idea of the commons; while the social imagination of cities as spaces for democratic change has been developed by connecting cities at regional, national and international scales, to prove that real change comes not only from state power but also from the way in which cities address local and global issues, through relationships of solidarity.

Municipalism claims the autonomy of the urban scale, which is often expressed as retaking sovereignty at the metropolitan scale. The loss of sovereignty by the state inside and outside its borders is diagnosed by municipalism as proof of the necessity to think about urban sovereignty as well as areas of shared sovereignty. The claim for urban sovereignty is used to underline the importance of cities as something more than merely a complementary scale; and the content of such sovereignty is seen as consisting of the control of public services. Ada Colau talks about everyday sovereignties such as retaking the management of water supply and control of energy; fighting against energy poverty; championing the right to housing; transparency; and the battle against corruption.⁵ These demands shape the municipalist agenda and reflect that municipalities, and not states, are leading changes in these areas. Municipalism contributes actively to political innovation; it is a project and transformative praxis to expand democracy, social empowerment and

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the reconnection of institutions with the common good.⁶ It can be defined as ‘the politicisation of citizens, introduction of a new public agenda (citizens’ participation and transparency) and spatialised politics that is not dependent on national politics’.⁷

The inclusion of participation as a core feature of progressive localism must be considered within a framework that considers the questions of *who* and *where*: who is responsible for municipalist politics, and where does participation take place?⁸ The first question focuses attention on the balance between the efficiency of institutions and the necessity of democratic participation. Institutions should embrace participation and social articulation, but must still be efficient, and necessarily operate within an existing, and often rigid, framework. The space of participation is mainly the neighbourhood, where a sense of community belonging is strong and the movements are organised; it is challenging to incorporate this into municipal decisions. However, in Barcelona, four years after the beginnings of the process of shaping the candidatures there has been a shift from constituting inclusive candidatures to developing inclusive governing. Many Barcelona en Comú cadres come from social movements and were integrated into the government, and this had the effect of weakening the social movements.⁹ This happened particularly in times of lesser mobilisation, and consequently political debate, when social networks were weakening - with the exception of the time of the mobilisations supporting the Catalan independence, which presented their own problems for Barcelona en Comú.¹⁰

As well as encountering these difficulties in combining the institutional and activist dimensions, municipalism has lost some of its traction at the national scale. It has thus lost one of its strengths, namely the movement character that was exercised in local governments.

Institutional and translocal solidarities

The question of how municipalism can contribute to shaping translocal solidarity can in part be answered by looking at the reaction and articulation of municipalities in strengthening a solidaristic approach to the humanitarian crisis of 2015. The so-called ‘refugee crisis’ provoked an intense solidarity movement, and the organisation of cities and municipalities - by citizens - to facilitate the arrival of refugees. As

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happened in the United States and Canada with the proclamation of ‘sanctuary cities’, European ‘cities of refuge’ aimed to accommodate refugees through local-level policies and practices, in opposition to exclusionary national policies.¹¹ The immediate response by the city of Barcelona made it clear that municipalism could entail a mode of handling global issues locally in a situation of inefficiency and hostility at the national level, and a mode of transforming solidarity relations and initiatives from civil society into institutional measures. In other words, municipalism developed forms of translocal and institutional solidarities. Barcelona City Council has contributed to the enhancement of spaces where the local and transnational can converge, and to the articulation of local spaces through networks; and it has also forged an institutional solidarity that is not limited to institutions but includes civic groups and activists, and aims to bring civil society’s demands into the policy sphere.¹² The City Council formalised this form of institutional solidarity by launching Barcelona’s Refuge City Plan in 2015, inaugurating ‘a citizen space to channel urban solidarity and to set up coordinated ways of participating in its application’.¹³ Just as municipalism implies a political project and imaginary of political and social change from the cities, the idea of a city of refuge becomes political and generates an imaginary of the city as place of solidarity - in contrast to national policies, border control and EU reactions. And in another parallel with municipalism, Spanish cities decided to organise themselves and set up a network of cities of refuge.

Barcelona’s Refuge City Plan reflects a specific conjuncture in which the city wanted to plan for the reception of refugees in the face of state inaction and obstacles. The organisation of solidarity would take the form of seeking to shape the civic space by coordinating groups and training and teaching people who were willing to be involved in reception. Civil society’s actions were perceived as valuable organising tools, and volunteers were redirected towards existing organisations and spaces that were helping newcomers, as well as initiatives like the efforts by members of ‘Welcome Refugees’ to rent out a room or to mentor refugees in the reception process. These activities were supported by the municipality. The idea of a Refuge City was subsequently expanded beyond its initial purpose to connect diverse institutions and initiatives addressing the needs of undocumented migrants and refugees. These include the Care Service for Immigrants, Emigrants and Refugees (SAIER), which offers information and advice; the Nausica Programme, which promotes the integration of refugees excluded from the institutions of public

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social support; the Office for Non-Discrimination, which offers information, support and legal advice in cases of discrimination; and the neighbourhood document brochure to improve the integration of residents regardless of their legal status.¹⁴

The shift of the Plan, from its origins in the urgency of solidarity and the reception and accommodation of refugees, to its engagement in everyday forms of solidarity, shows how mobilisation and spontaneous forms of solidarity can be replaced by collaboration with organisations, some of them with years of experience in the field, and an attempt to reach local neighbourhoods through new means of participation. Gloria Rendón, coordinator of SAIER and the Nausica programme, summarises perfectly the change of priorities: ‘When the “Barcelona Refugee City Plan” was created, the impact on the city was more media than real ... Now we have a real impact but less media’.¹⁵ She notes that refugees are still arriving and becoming part of the city, but with different profiles, such as, for instance, refugees from Venezuela and Colombia. Pablo Peralta de Andrés, who has responsibility for sensitivity and participation in the Plan, refers to the difference between solidarity in general and specifically located solidarity: ‘Solidarity shouldn’t be with refugees in general but with a population that is arriving and with a logic of a good and new neighbourhood’.¹⁶

The contrast between solidarity as practised by institutions and as practised by civil society became clear in February 2017, when around 160,000 people demonstrated in Barcelona to demand the reception of more refugees. The civil society campaign ‘Casa Nostra, Casa Vostra’ (‘Our Home, Your Home’) connected with the spirit of the ‘Refugees Welcome’ mobilisations, and moved the focus from everyday solidarity to translocal solidarity by connecting the conditions of the refugee camps in Greece with the streets of Barcelona. The City Council was promoting international networks and formal cooperation within the EU, in the framework of the programme ‘Solidarity Cities’, but civil society was showing the value of connecting scales from below. (It should be emphasised here that the focus of criticism was not the City Council but the Spanish government and its lack of willingness to contribute to find an international solution.)

Another form of solidarity which it is important to highlight is maritime solidarity. Economically and institutionally, Barcelona City Hall has supported Proactiva Open Arms, an NGO that rescues people in open sea searching for asylum in Europe. The lack of any political will by European states to take responsibility

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for the people rescued at sea makes the cities active actors in finding solutions and questioning the border system. That is what has happened in cities like Barcelona and Valencia, when they asked the government for permission to allow the rescue ship Open Arms to dock. The ship called for a safe port to dock after rescuing more than 120 people, after the Spanish government refused to take action. Colau emphasised that humanitarian help was an obligation and not an option and that some cities were willing to receive the migrants.¹⁷ Other cities added to the proposal and offered to accommodate some of the migrants.

Institutional solidarity implies a major role for cities in managing the social realities of migration, as well as an exploration of spaces for cooperation with civil society organisations and fostering citizens' participation. This does not mean that municipalities and civil society share precisely the same concerns or interests, and this can provoke some tensions. But civil society and municipalities have each promoted, with their own means, the development of translocal solidarities. Indeed, one of the main goals of Barcelona has been to connect urban geographies, and to present municipalism as a scale of doing politics from below.

Geographies of hope

Returning to the key question of how to translate the municipalist experience to the transnational scale, it must be noted that the idea of scaling up municipalism has entailed several points of critique. The first of these is the argument that the local is an insufficient scale, and must refer to the state, where real sovereignty is supposed to reside. The second is the argument that the local scale must be abandoned in order to focus efforts on national parties, rather than local citizens' platforms. The third is that transnational connections are made, fundamentally, by states and the role of the municipalities and translocal networks is thus a lesser one. All these points ignore the power of municipalities to construct a political alternative by reclaiming the importance of localism. This does not mean, however, that the national or the global scales are not important. There is therefore a need for transforming the politics of scale.

Barcelona en Comú served as an inspiration for the creation of a regional party, Catalonia en Comú, though with quite modest electoral results and a party dynamic which is different from that of Barcelona en Comú. Its relationship with Podemos,

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at the national scale, is characterised by a focus on preserving the autonomy of Barcelona en Comú. The conflicts between Podemos and the United Left, on the one side, and between municipal initiatives, on the other, had very unfortunate consequences for Spanish municipalism, although they have not emerged in Barcelona; for her part, Colau, together with the Catalan parliamentary group, has often insisted on bringing municipalism into the debates at national level. Meanwhile the Catalan process for independence contributes to a limiting of the potential for the elaboration of urban or everyday sovereignty, given that the main conflict has been between the Spanish state and Catalonia. In brief, there is certainly a risk of losing the autonomy of municipalism through scaling up, but, equally, it is impossible not to scale up regionally, nationally and internationally. The question is how to do it differently. One such way is entailed in the idea of thinking in terms of 'scaling out' rather than 'scaling up' - this refers to the ways in which municipalities can act in solidarity with each other and promote a new form of political action.¹⁸

Barcelona, together with other municipalities, has scaled up municipalism, not to subordinate or replace the local scale with the national one, but to create a network through connecting the geographies of municipal change. One result of such coordination is the Atlas of Change, a site which includes a map in which municipal policies and initiatives are included, and which also takes into account rural areas and global cities. The most ambitious project of scaling up municipalism has been the launch of Fearless Cities in June 2017, when Barcelona en Comú hosted the first international Fearless Cities summit. This brought together more than 700 officially registered participants from all over the world. Through the initiative of Fearless Cities, localism is able to move beyond the 'local trap' (meaning the local scale as inherently more democratic than other scales); and it is framed as a strategic front for developing a transformative politics of scale.¹⁹ Ada Colau positions municipalism as opposed to global neoliberalism: 'municipalism is a rising force that seeks to transform fear into hope from the bottom up, and build that hope together'.²⁰ The idea of upscaling municipalism and moving towards a global municipalism seeks to overcome the division between winners and losers, us versus them, and to create an international network to promote human rights, environmental justice and feminism. In opposition to the politics of fear and exclusion promoted by 'the few', municipalism seeks to work for 'the many' and the common. The Fearless Cities map, elaborated by Barcelona en Comú in collaboration with other municipalists, represents the global scope of municipalism as an alternative way of acting -

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locally, through participatory and inclusive collaboration between institutions and civil society, and translocally, through connecting the practices of municipalist organisations.

The value of global municipalism is two-fold. Firstly, it promotes a political alternative: connecting municipalisms to create geographies of hope in opposition to projects of globalised fear, and its multiple manifestations in racism, xenophobia and general rejection of the other. Secondly, it highlights localism as a progressive scale for both municipalities and activists - one that is already changing the ways of doing politics - and a politics of scale beyond the state. The first and following summits in Barcelona, and the elaboration of the Fearless cities map, are important in that they gather and share what is being learned, and the practical knowledge being generated - regarding public policies, organisational forms and political practices outside institutions.²¹

Conclusion: the continuation of municipalism

The promising project of municipalism, as it emerged in Spain in 2015, faces many difficulties. Ada Colau continued as mayor after the municipal elections as part of a coalition, but electoral support for her project decreased. The loss of Madrid City Hall left the centre-right coalition, with the support of the far right, leading the municipality. Even worse, the many internal struggles, disagreements and conflicts within municipalism, including between medium and minor municipalities, raise serious concerns about the future of municipalism.

Municipalism - commonly labelled as new municipalism - has never been based on the claim that the local scale is in itself progressive. When Spanish municipalism decided to coordinate efforts, it remained clear that it was a political project in which cities were already considered the space of organising, and that they were offering solutions to issues such as climate change, migration, economic inequality and gender inequality. These issues are global but are not being addressed satisfactorily by nation states. Localism has been politicised as well as scaled: municipalism connects national and global networks translocally to exchange knowledge and coordinate initiatives to change the way of doing politics. The democratisation of institutions and the shaping of a transformative project from below also characterises municipalism. However, municipalism, in both its institutional and activist

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dimension, cannot be disembedded from the logics of electoral politics and the national (and, in Catalonia, pro-independence) agenda.

The main concern for municipalism is its continuation. Due to its strong political profile, it remains unclear if the measures promoted by the municipalist project entail lasting institutions or if they are going to be replaced with new (and contrary) ones by new local governments. The key is the strength of civil society organisations and social mobilizations to continue articulating a progressive localism, once one of the main features of Spanish municipalism (changing by ruling the municipality) is gone in many of the municipalities. The chances to repeat a scenario similar to 2015 are quite remote and this makes the question of how to coordinate civil society and institutional efforts in the future pertinent. It is, in any case, expected that Barcelona will maintain its leading role in promoting global municipalism. There are also problems in seeing municipalism as alternative to globalised fear and the rise of the far-right. There are many elements that make municipalism valuable to ending the consolidation of the far-right: the politics of proximity and the focus on community, self-organisation and defence of common. The strong sense of identity, articulated in terms of the opposition between insiders and outsiders, could be replaced with the sense of belonging and acting together. The electoral results and the increasing influence of the right show the difficulty of combating the far-right, including from the municipalities. Instead of perceiving this as a municipalist defeat, however, it should be used to confirm the validity of municipalism as a spatialized political project to transform fear into hope. Despite the current, more negative conjuncture, any backlash against municipalism can only be interpreted as a democratic backlash.

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