

## Abstract

Four years after a huge protest movement known as 15M had appeared in Spanish cities, the transformation of this movement into municipalist confluences meant the start of an experiment in 'real democracy'. (New) municipalism does not only refer to a form of territorial politics, but it also entails a method about redesigning democracy to obtain radical change. It is considered as a strategy to deal with the impact of globalization and to challenge the neoliberal order. Four years later, the elections were less successful for the municipalist forces. In Madrid, the municipalist experiment even came to an end. Many adherents of municipalism were not only disappointed in the policy results, but also about how the municipalist method was put into practice. The main research question is: What problems did the municipalist project of Ahora Madrid experience? The method entails an analysis of interviews and written excerpts by people involved in the municipalist movement and how they reflect on the municipalist experiment in Madrid (and beyond). Whereas different kinds of categorizations of challenges or problems could be discerned out of the data, I will analyze the problems according to the three central elements of municipalism. The main aim is to draw some lessons regarding the capacity of the municipalist project in its aim to transform the institutions and to modify the political-economic order.

### **1. Introduction.**

On 15 May 2011, a huge protest movement known as 15M appeared in more than 57 Spanish cities and quickly took the form of occupations of central squares (Martín & Urquiza-Sancho, 2012).<sup>1</sup> What united the people on the squares could best be summarized by the Foucauldian question "*how not to be governed*" (Odysseos et al., 2016, 153); (Foucault, 2007, 44). They did not want to be governed anymore by the traditional political parties who were held responsible for the bad management of the crisis and who were accused of corruption. They were also fed up with the banks, who were deemed responsible for the crisis and the evictions. What united people on the squares was a total rejection of the political-economic order. The answer to the question how to be governed differently was 'real democracy'.<sup>2</sup> The encampment of the squares was more than just an occupation but gave birth to prefigurative politics organized around a more radical, direct form of democracy (based on horizontality and deliberation) in contradiction to representative democracy (Martín Rojo, 2014) (Maeckelbergh, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interesting articles that reflect on the act of these occupations are: (Dhaliwal, 2012); (Martín Rojo, 2014); (Romanos, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> This argument is based upon a larger chapter of the author's dissertation (that is still a work in progress). A selection of used sources: (Antentas, 2017) (Hughes, 2011) (Castañeda, 2012) (Sampedro & Lobera, 2014); (Mena et al., 2018); (López, 2016) (Perugorria & Tejerina, 2013) (Rodríguez López, 2016a) (Taibo, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Another article by Maeckelbergh explains the notion of prefiguration very well: (Maeckelbergh, 2011).

After months of contentious acts (by means of occupying squares and buildings, organizing assemblies and working groups, protesting against austerity measures in different sectors, anti-eviction actions of the PAH (Plataforma de Afectadas por la Hipoteca, and so forth) more and more people became aware of the fact that they were failing to have a larger impact in order to introduce change in the political-economic order (Tormey & Feenstra, 2015) (Portos, 2016). Whereas initially, the autonomous-institutional divide inside 15M was a *conditio sine qua non*, 15M would witness a shift towards a critique combining prefigurative practices of radical democracy within social movement spaces with a move that reclaims state institutions (such as courts, the constitution, parliaments) as an instrument to change and upgrade representative democracy (Flesher Fominaya, 2015) (Maeckelbergh, 2012); (Maeckelbergh, 2011); (Díaz-Parra & Jover-Báez, 2016; Díaz Parra et al., 2017; Díaz-Parra & Roca, 2017).

This led to the creation of movement-parties such as Podemos at the national level and municipalist confluences at the local level.<sup>4</sup> In 2015, these municipalist confluences caused a shockwave in the local elections in Spain (Monterde, 2019). Barcelona and Madrid were the two most important cities that would be governed by a municipalist confluence. However, in Madrid, the municipalist experiment came to an end after four years. Not only did Ahora Madrid split into two actors who would participate separately in the local elections of 2019 (the list of the Mayor Más Madrid and the list of the more critical sectors united in Madrid en Pie Municipalista), the dispersed municipalist forces were also outnumbered by the right-wing parties Partido Popular, Ciudadanos and Vox.

Assessing to what extent Ahora Madrid brought significant change during its stay in the city council, is a difficult task. First, what kind of aim do you consider? Whereas municipalism is first and foremost seen as the attempt to implement a new radical form of democracy, some activist-scholars (involved in the movement) consider it also as a strategy to challenge the neoliberal political - economic order (Thompson, 2020); (Rubio-Pueyo, 2018); (Roth & Shea Baird, 2017); (Beltran, 2019). Second, different evaluations could be obtained whether you focus on specific policy domains. Third, we need to be careful in evaluating a municipalist project that was in place for only four years: it is impossible to change the city entirely in such a short time span.<sup>5</sup> Because Ahora Madrid fell apart even before the elections of 2019 due to internal disagreements about the project, I am interested in the challenges and problems that Ahora Madrid had to confront and were at the basis of its disintegration.

The main research question is: What problems did the municipalist project of Ahora Madrid experience? To answer this question, I focus on the perspective of both the members of Madrid en Pie Municipalista, Más Madrid and other actors (such as members of social movements, activist scholars) who were involved with Ahora Madrid or have links with the

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<sup>4</sup> The following book chapters provide a good introduction to Podemos: (Agustín & Briziarelli, 2018; Rendueles & Sola, 2018); (Rodríguez López, 2016b). Another interesting book that provides a good introduction to the notion of party-movements that also focuses on Podemos is (Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, & Mosca, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> This is acknowledged by members of Ahora Madrid such as (Calvo del Olmo, 2020a, 20).

broader municipalist movement.<sup>6</sup> I am interested how the actors involved in the municipalist project evaluate their own governing experience and what this experience means in their evaluation of municipalism as a project to modify the dominant political-economic order. The data was obtained through interviews, attendance of assemblies, public gatherings during the elections of 2019, and the study of books, opinion pieces and articles written by the members involved in the municipalist movement (and academics). The problems are analyzed according to the three central elements of municipalism. The main aim is to draw some lessons regarding the capacity of the municipalist project in its aim to transform the institutions and to modify the political-economic order. Therefore, in the conclusion, I elaborate shortly if the detected problems are intrinsic to the municipalist project or do they entail a problem of implementation?

## **2. Defining Municipalism.**

Municipalism is not a typical Spanish phenomenon, but it is a global movement residing under the banner of many names such as Fearless cities, communalism or just municipalism (Pisarello, 2019). Municipalism is not a mere 21st century phenomenon but has a long history (Roth, 2019b) (Roth, 2019a); (Monterde, 2019); (Bookchin, 2019); (Thompson, 2020); (Metropolitano, 2014b). How could this (new) municipalism be defined? Activist-scholars involved in the global municipalist movement provide good basic definitions (Roth, Monterde, & López, 2019). I will highlight three elements that are central in the (new) municipalist approach as outlined by members of el Observatorio Metropolitano<sup>7</sup> and the broader municipalist movement:<sup>8</sup> (1) transforming the institutions and distribution of power; (2) starting from the local without reifying it (3) exceeding the division between institutions and the movement.

### **2.1. Democracy as self-governance.**

Drawing further on the legacy of 15M, democracy is central in the municipalist approach (Monterde, 2019). Monterde even claims that municipalism is a synonym of democracy. The question of course remains: how is democracy conceptualized by the municipalist movement? What do we need to understand under the banner of 'real democracy'? Obviously, an alternative form of democracy is defended in contradiction to its classical representative form:

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<sup>6</sup> I also relied upon the work of other academics.

<sup>7</sup> The Observatorio Metropolitano in Madrid was an activist research collective (out of which the Instituto para la Democracia y el Municipalismo would emerge), and played an important role in introducing theories, concepts and ideas inside the municipalist movement. The Observatorio Metropolitano became most famous for writing 'La Apuesta Municipalista' in which they present and reflect on the possibilities and limits of municipalism as a force for social change (Metropolitano, 2014b). Important members were: Emmanuel Rodríguez; Isidro López; Pablo Carmona.

<sup>8</sup> A central key work I rely upon is (Roth, Monterde, & López, 2019) whose authors are almost all involved in the municipalist movement. Some of them like Laura Roth and Alejandra de Diego Baciero are also member of the Minim community that is a key group of activists, public officials, journalists and scholars of different countries who are involved in the municipalist movement. Other members of Minim whose work I rely upon in this article are: Russell, Bookchin, Rubio-Pueyo and Thompson. This community gives shape at the Minim project whose aim is to promote municipalism (by means of sharing existing and generating new knowledge about municipalism); support municipalist projects and create a network between people, movements and initiatives identified as part of the municipalist project. For more information: <https://minim-municipalism.org/what-is-minim>.

'radical democracy', '*mandar obedeciendo*', 'open and horizontal forms of decision-making' and politics '*de abajo hacia arriba*' (Roth, 2019a). Therefore, the municipalist project could not be reduced to a kind of progressive government. Principally, it is about changing the form of how power is exercised to make decisions that affect the lives of citizens and inhabitants of the city. Also, the notion of participatory democracy is surprisingly a contested term inside the municipalist literature (Rodríguez, 2017). Emmanuel Rodríguez asserts that methods of participation cannot be confused with direct forms of democracy, which again refer to the radical character of municipalist democracy. Therefore, another concept is preferred by municipalists: *autogobierno or self-governance* (Roth, 2019a) (Rodríguez, 2017). This claim is explicitly made in *La Apuesta Municipalista* (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014b).

Importantly, 'self-governance' does not denounce local (political) institutions. According to Russell ((2019);(2017)) the question is not what the local state can do, but what we can do to the local state. The aim is to use municipal institutions as part of a project of autonomy and to transform and distribute power. Distributing power does not entail a change in the relationship between institutions and civil society (social movements, citizens, ...), but also implies a transformation of the institutions themselves. It is not enough to enter the local governments, but to transform these (Carmona Pascual, Lopéz, & Rodríguez, 2015). Roth and Baird (Roth, 2019b) (Roth & Shea Baird, 2017) affirm that municipalism is providing simultaneously a new role for local institutions: instead of being the lowest level of governance, local institutions need to be turned into mechanisms of self-governance. This is a key point in the new municipalist approach. In *La Apuesta Municipalista* (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014a, 143), we read that the municipalist hypothesis entails the following: "*If we take the institutions that are most immediate to citizens, municipalities, and turn them into areas of direct decision, we can make a democracy worthy of the name.*"

## **2.2. The importance of the local: proximity and knowledge**

There is a paradox inside the municipalist movement. On the one hand, municipalism starts from the assumption that municipalities are the elementary political units of a bottom-up made construction (Rodríguez, 2017). On the other hand, Russell (2019) argues that new municipalists do not fall in the local trap.<sup>9</sup> Purcell (2006) explains the problem of the local trap as the tendency to conflate 'the local or the municipal' with 'greater democracy or justice'. Instead of seeing the local as a special scale that has some intrinsic qualities, it is better to approach the local as a strategic entry point for developing a transformative and prefigurative politics aiming at a radical distribution of economic power and political decision-making (Russell, 2019) (Thompson, 2020).<sup>10</sup> Central inside municipalism is that the local level is conceived as an elementary starting point for any project of radical democracy. Roth (2019b) explains that '*if we can't put in place processes that empower ordinary people on this scale, it cannot be done on any higher scale*'. But why do we need to start from the local level? Two important

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<sup>9</sup> See also (Thompson, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> New municipalists acknowledge that it would be a mistake to remain focused on the local level in order to preserve the pure character of municipalism (Bertran, 2019; Monterde, 2019; Roth, 2019b).

assumptions are here in play: the notion proximity assumption; and the reliance upon collective knowledge.

*The notion of proximity* entails that “*democracy starts in what is closer to you*” (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019) (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014b).<sup>11</sup> Democracy loses its content and capacity if it does not give way to 'areas of direct decision' where people can exercise or enjoy some form of self-government (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014a). Bookchin asserts that municipalism seeks to take advantage of the proximity between local institutions and the community to break with the parliamentary-party axis of public representation (which implies delegation) (Beltran, 2019). This notion of proximity can only be found at the local scale where the distance between political institutions and citizens is closest. It is this proximity that makes it possible to develop radical democracy which entails that decision-making resides in the hands of the members of community and is no subject of delegation.

Furthermore, the local is not only the scale where problems are experienced and take a specific local form (Roth & Shea Baird, 2017) (Roth, 2019a) (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019). The idea of municipalism also entails that cities and villages are those spaces where the complexity and diversity of society can be managed best (Beltran, 2019); (Roth, 2019a); (Roth, 2019b). Municipalism seeks to build power to change reality throughout this complexity, by embracing it rather than trying to impose an inevitable simplistic order from outside. A municipalist project both exploits and relies on the direct and close interaction between local institutions and the community, and therefore, relies upon different forms of alliances, opinions, and actors. As a result, change will be produced bottom-up because it will be based on the collective intelligence, rather than the narrow knowledge of a limited group of policymakers and experts. This brings us to the second assumption which deals with the question where knowledge is to be found: *the knowledge resides to the people*.<sup>12</sup> These two elements of proximity and collective knowledge turn the local into a space where significant change can be produced: by relying on regular people - not only on their experiences of real-life problems - but on their knowledge to tackle these (Beltran, 2019); (Roth, 2019a) (Baird, Delso, & Zechner, 2019).

### **2.3. Exceeding the division between institutions and the movement.**

A recurrent topic inside municipalism is the acknowledgement that occupying the institutions is not enough, even if the aim is to transform them (Reyes & Russell, 2017); (Russell, 2019). Russell and Reyes, for instance, argue that inside the confluence of Barcelona en Comú, actors were very aware of the fact that to create significant change on a local scale you need to combine both the strategies of being inside the political institutions and by simultaneously organizing outside of the institutions (by means of movements, protests, and

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<sup>11</sup> This is the translation of “La democracia empieza por lo próximo” which is the first sentence of La Apuesta Municipalista (Metropolitano, 2014b), the book written by the Observatorio Metropolitano.

<sup>12</sup> In Municipalia, the predecessor of Ganemos Madrid, the idea to activate and rely on the enormous collective knowledge, that resides in the citizenry and the movements in the urban cityscape, is explicitly mentioned in one of their first documents. See: <https://municipalia.tumblr.com>

so forth). According to Roth (2019b, 1) occupying and transforming political institutions is not enough and is only part of a broader strategy “based on building power from the bottom up, both within and outside formal institutions.” This is also acknowledged by the Observatorio Metropolitano of Madrid (2014a) who claim that the most important element of the municipalist project is that a municipalist confluence needs to organize itself first and foremost as a movement. The initial idea behind the municipalist confluences was to serve as the institutional battering ram as part of a broader democratic movement that started with 15M (Fernández & Rodríguez López, 2015).

According to Fernández and Rodríguez (2015), municipalism understood as part of this broader movement entails another important element. Besides the awareness that municipalism only exists if it can **consolidate and develop a strong movement within but especially outside the institutions** (or in other words: to be autonomous from the institution), the natural form of municipalism is its appearance as **counterpower** (*contrapoder*) which needs to spread through the urban fabric. Without mobilization and sustained demands or without creating conflict, consistories can quickly turn into a bureaucratic machinery, far removed from the people and their problems (Espinoza & Encinas, 2016) (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014a) (Rodríguez & Carmona Pascual, 2015).<sup>13</sup> Without developing and consolidating a broad, popular, extra-institutional and autonomous dimension, the municipalist approach will not be able to impose any substantial change (Rodríguez & Carmona Pascual, 2015); (Metropolitano, 2014a).

### **3. Challenges and problems in Ahora Madrid.**

In this part, I will reflect on certain problems or challenges that were experienced in the municipalist project of Madrid between 2015 and 2019. I analyze these issues according to the three central elements of municipalism as exemplified in the previous section.

#### **3.1. Democracy as self-governance.**

Creating a form of radical democracy where power is distributed in society is based upon a collective way of co-constructing an alternative reality (in absence of a clear blueprint). This idea gave way to a specific form of organization of the municipalist projects in Spain (Junqué, Tepp, & Fernández, 2019). They would not be settled as parties nor movements but as confluences: new mixed spaces wherein different kind of actors would get involved such as social movements (like the PAH, the Mareas, members of 15M, ...), political parties (Podemos, Izquierda Unida, the Green party Equo), social organizations and members of social centres (La Tabacalera or Patio Marravillas) and citizens who acted in different sectors and places (Martínez & Baciero, 2019); (Celleja & Toret, 2019). The confluence allowed different kinds of actors to bring in their specific knowledge and experiences into a political project with the aim

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<sup>13</sup> Rodríguez and Carmona (Rodríguez & Carmona Pascual, 2015) point to the decline of the neighbourhood movement after 1979 as a warning from history.

to break through the *'el techo cristal'* (Martínez & Baciero, 2019); (Junqué, Tepp, & Fernández, 2019).

Paradoxically, one of the biggest problems Ahora Madrid experienced is related to the internal democratic organization of the confluence. In brief, the confluence never transformed itself from an electoral platform into a political organization with a coherent strategy and internal democratic structure.<sup>14</sup> **Several factors are worth mentioning here.** First, the decision to form an alliance between Ganemos<sup>15</sup> and Podemos to run for the elections in 2015 would turn out to be problematic. Both actors had different ideas of (internal) democracy: (1) the democratic model of Ganemos was based upon notions of horizontality, deliberation and cooperation; (2) Podemos embraced another variant characterized by a voting logic (based upon the principle of the winner takes it all) and a vertical party hierarchy.<sup>16</sup> What you got in the end was the attempt to compromise both models into a synthetic organization in which both organizations were represented equally.<sup>17</sup> Bringing together these two logics into a confluence is one thing. Transforming these two logics into one coherent project and organization is another.

Second reason for the failure of creating one coherent organization was the decision of Ahora Madrid to hold primaries in order to compose the lists of Ahora Madrid for the elections.<sup>18</sup> This move created not only a competitive logic inside the confluence between the two main actors, but also sustained and deepened existing factions, and also created new ones.<sup>19</sup> Already during the primaries, it was obvious that there were three different kinds of candidacies (Carmena and Podemos, Ganemos and Izquierda Unida) whose aim was to obtain as much power as possible inside the confluence in order to fight for its own agenda.<sup>20</sup> Also, the construction of a municipalist confluence in which different actors are involved and united around the question 'how not to be conducted' does not automatically lead to a consensus of how to organize things differently. The lack of consensus on a specific alternative and course of action was indeed a preeminent feature of the whole political program of Ahora Madrid in 2015, and therefore, also in the efforts to implement it along the ruling period. Conversations and processes of reflection with members of Más Madrid and M129 organized by UCM in March 2020<sup>21</sup> exposed that the collective program used as the basis for the political action program of the city government deployed a "strategy of opposition" {Rondelez and Medina García, 2020, #58639}. It was a complete rejection of the previous policies of the

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<sup>14</sup> This was acknowledged in a public debate with councillors of Ahora Madrid who were on the list of Madrid en Pie (Montserrat Galcerán and Pablo Carmona at Traficantes de Sueños) in May 2019 in Madrid. See also interview with respondents U, Z and B.

<sup>15</sup> Which was the initial municipalist platform consisting of different kind of actors.

<sup>16</sup> The case of Podemos is very complex. According to Kioupkiolis (Kioupkiolis, 2016) Podemos started as hybrid mix between a more horizontal and vertical/hierarchical approach, but from 2014 onwards the party became more and more organized according to a vertical, hegemonic logic. Another interesting chapter that describes the transformation of Podemos is (Rodríguez López, 2016b).

<sup>17</sup> In the 'mesa de coordinación' of Ahora Madrid, an equal number of members of Podemos and Ganemos were included, added by so-called consensus figures. <https://www.ahoramadrid.org/ahora-madrid/mesa-de-coordinacion-de-ahora-madrid/>

<sup>18</sup> Interview respondent X

<sup>19</sup> Interview respondent B and M

<sup>20</sup> Interview respondent M

<sup>21</sup> Interview session with members of Más Madrid and M129 by UCM in March 2020.

conservative party (Partido Popular) who had ruled the city for more than 20 years. Nevertheless, it lacked agreed proposals and a city model on how to do things differently.

Furthermore, the compromise between Podemos and Ganemos to create an organization in which both were represented never got the chance to proof its functionality, nor to act according to its own internal democratic principles.<sup>22</sup> Manuela Carmena, who had become mayor, sidelined Ahora Madrid as an organization by not accepting its program and by not acknowledging its legitimacy.<sup>23</sup> On the level of the city council, the political agenda was also dominated by the group around Carmena, who thankfully made use of the Ley de Capitalidad that gives full power to the mayor.<sup>24</sup> The result was that every councillor acted independently in his or her domain: according to which faction he or she belonged and according to the red lines that were drawn by Manuela Carmena.<sup>25</sup> The latter meant a total departure and even rejection of one of the important elements inside municipalism: a shift from transforming to managing.

A former member of Ganemos argued that inside Ahora Madrid there were two big approaches to change the city: one of managing the city or changing the city.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand there was the group around Carmena whose vision has been exemplified by José Manuel Calvo of Más Madrid (the councillor of urban planning). In his latest book, he argues that being accused of merely 'managing the city' by more radical actors should be considered as a huge compliment (Calvo del Olmo, 2020b). A good management of the city is not only a requirement of democracy (Carmena, 2020, 10), but managing adequately the public goods and services is also seen as the best antidote against neoliberalism (Calvo del Olmo, 2020a). On the other hand, more radical groups linked to Ganemos argued that municipalism has nothing to do with merely managing the city but is about a true democratic transformation of the city. This not only entails that municipalism is more than just progressive politics, but also consists of a critique on the policies of citizen participation that Ahora Madrid implemented. Whereas old forms of citizen participation were resuscitated, and, new and innovative trajectories were introduced (of which the most important are the Foros Locales and Decide Madrid), these policies also received a lot of critique from the ones who claimed to defend the municipalist project.

According to Pablo Carmona (2020), councillor of Ahora Madrid and linked to Ganemos, one of the problems was that both instruments of the trajectories regarding physical participation (Foros Locales) and digital participation (Decide Madrid) were delinked from each other, whereas in Barcelona similar initiatives were embedded in a more coherent model. Although the problems of the Foros Locales were acknowledged by many inside the confluence<sup>27</sup>, at least it created a certain participatory network in the neighbourhoods (Carmona Pascual, 2020). Carmona argues that the digital participation model was much

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<sup>22</sup> Interview respondent T, C and R

<sup>23</sup> Interview respondents A, V and L

<sup>24</sup> Interview respondents B and C

<sup>25</sup> Interview respondent M

<sup>26</sup> Interview respondent J

<sup>27</sup> See also: Interview respondent V, J and Y

more problematic because it was based upon techno-liberal methods (that reminded to plebiscitary individualism) whereas municipalism entails a more community participation perspective. However, the digital model as entrenched in the so-called Consul system built a hierarchy between institution and citizenship and as such designed a model of participation that was little useful for the construction of communities or the promotion of association processes.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.2. Limits of the local.

As Blanco and colleagues (Blanco et al., 2020) already outlined for the case of Barcelona en Comú, the same conclusion could be drawn for the case in Madrid: (1) the lack of government powers and resources at the local level (2) in combination with regional and national administrations who were not very cooperative and imposed austerity measures made it extremely difficult to transform the city.<sup>29</sup> Janoschka (Janoschka & Mota, 2020), who also did research to Ahora Madrid and came to similar conclusions regarding the relationship with higher policy levels, detects three categories of limits: economical, politico-institutional, legal-administrative. While the notion of proximity entails that democracy begins '*por lo próximo*', it certainly does not end at the local scale.

However, I would like to pay more attention to another limit that is linked that other central assumption: the knowledge resides to the people. We have seen that a municipalist project both exploits and relies on the direct and close interaction between the local institutions and the community.<sup>30</sup> This proximity is only to be found at the local level. Therefore, it is not only the perfect scale to radicalize democracy (understood as turning decision-making to the members of the community and bypassing any kind of delegation to elected people or experts) but also to produce significant change in complex matters. As a result, change will be produced bottom-up because it will be based on the collective intelligence rather than the narrow knowledge of a limited group of policy-makers and experts.

Nevertheless, the notions of complexity and knowledge are insufficiently problematized inside municipalism, and it is at this point where a major challenge is found. This came to the fore in the policy area of urban planning where Ahora Madrid intended to install a new urban model. Two important elements were central here: (1) the aim of Ahora Madrid was to improve the existing city for the common good or the general interest (Ahora Madrid, 2015); (Madrid, 2016); (2) a shift in method that entailed a combination of a protagonist role of the local government in urban planning and establishing a public debate about a new city model and the mechanisms to implement this model (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2016; Ahora Madrid, 2015) (Plataforma No a este Plan Urbanístico, 2015) (Ayuntamiento Madrid, 2018).

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<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the actors involved in developing these digital trajectories (like Decide Madrid) were busy with seeking for solutions to transform the logic of individual participation inside Decide Madrid into one of collective participation (See for instance: Laboratorio de Inteligencia Colectiva para la Participación Democrática futuras, 2019, 150)

<sup>29</sup> Interview respondent Y

<sup>30</sup> See sources on page 4-5

However, including the citizen in this area is no easy task to do because of the complexity of the policy matter.

The complexity of urban governance and planning was already a stumbling block for a lot of people participating in the redesign of public squares (such as Plaza España).<sup>31</sup> Another important – and very complex issue – was the inheritance of big unfinished urban development projects (such as Operation Madrid Nuevo Norte). Although some people inside the confluence were more in favour of stopping these projects altogether, this would entail a breach of previously made decisions which would lead to sentences and fines to be paid by the city council (Carmona Pascual, 2018). Therefore, Ahora Madrid opted to revise these projects as much as possible so that they would serve the general interest and (in some cases) by including the citizen through so-called participation tables. It is no surprise that many citizens viewed these big projects, as very abstract and challenging projects to comprehend. Whilst it is true that relatively easy victories can be achieved at the local level, proving that change is possible, this does not (necessarily) apply to complex matters.

In the absence of an easy and quick victory, it becomes increasingly hard to mobilize people, and contestation of this complex urban operation indeed remained very marginal (Rondelez & Medina García, 2020). Rather than an example of popular engagement, the debate is almost entirely conducted by experts (urban experts, economists, mobility experts, critical thinkers, activist-scholars). Another problem is that the majority of the population in Madrid seems to support the approved proposal of Operation Nuevo Norte which was heavily contested inside the municipalist confluence and was depicted as the resurgence of the old neoliberal model.<sup>32</sup> This could only mean three things: (1) a majority of the people are not aware of the possible negative impact of this project (in terms of sustainability, mobility, gentrification, and so forth); (2) or they do not care; (3) or the critique of this project (regarding the method and content) by the more radical forces inside Ahora Madrid was overrated and wrong.

At this point we could ask a question: what knowledge matters and who has access to that knowledge (Rondelez & Medina García, 2020)? The claim that ‘the people will decide’ is based upon the assumption that the ‘appropriate’ knowledge resides with the people. But this dismisses any idea that knowledge (and more in particular truth) needs to be constructed. Truths are not discovered but constructed. Therefore, we should not think in terms of a battle on behalf of the truth, but about the status of truth.<sup>33</sup> The question about what knowledge matters is inherently related to the status of truth. Intellectuals (or experts) play an important role in the production of truth. Especially in complex matters like the Operation Madrid Nuevo Norte, we see that intellectuals and experts are involved in the debate, more than regular citizens.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview respondent N

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.madriidiario.es/453123/el-81-de-los-madrilenos-apoyan-madrid-nuevo-norte>

<sup>33</sup> A great contribution regarding this problematique could be read in (Foucault, 1994). Foucault argues that the problem for an intellectual is not to change people’s consciousness, but the political, economic and institutional regime of the production of truth.

Against this background it is interesting that Reyes and Russell (2017) suggest the possibility of combining “citizen wisdom with expert knowledge” to tackle problems people face in their daily lives. For real democracy to function, we need to go beyond the claim of ‘the people will decide’ and develop a more nuanced interaction between different kinds of actors with different kinds of knowledge (Rondelez & Medina García, 2020).<sup>34</sup> Concretely, we need to solve three problems: (1) in the current context of hybridization of roles, how do you define and differentiate citizens from experts and the knowledge they share or produce; (2) how do you combine these two different kinds of knowledges; (3) how do you make sure that this combined knowledge will gain sufficient authority to be able to stand against adversary powers?

### ***3.3. Exceeding the division between institution and movement.***

Besides the critique on the way participation methods were implemented, what was forgotten inside Ahora Madrid was that democracy is much more than mere citizen participation. Besides a rather modest transformation of those (political) institutions that are most close to the citizens into areas of direct decision-making, the second element regarding radical democratization was more problematic in the case of Ahora Madrid. Municipalism only exists if it can consolidate and develop a strong movement within but especially outside the institutions (Fernández & Rodríguez López, 2015). Central inside the municipalist approach is to combine both strategies of being inside the political institutions and by simultaneously organizing outside of the institutions (Alòs-Moner, 2017) (Reyes & Russell, 2017). But to withstand and change a hostile political-economic environment<sup>35</sup>, the consolidation of a movement dimension must produce a continuing state of agitation and conflict (or contrapoder) that exceeds the institutional level and the citizen life (Metropolitano, 2014a) (Fernández & Rodríguez López, 2015).<sup>36</sup> As a result, the strict divide between institution and movement is blurred. Nevertheless, three problems arose in the case of Ahora Madrid which kept this divide intact and had huge consequences for the municipalist project.

#### **(I) The weakening of already weak social movements.**

The entrance of people of the municipalist platform (which had its origins in different kinds of social movements) inside the institutions had a huge impact on the development and consolidation of social movements as a possible counterforce. Some actors inside the confluence noticed that the social movements out of which people were recruited to go the institutional level were weakened by this move.<sup>37</sup> Although it was emphasized that people who went to the political institutions did not represent the movements<sup>38</sup>, in some cases they were important figures whose absence in the movement had a great impact on the capacity of

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<sup>34</sup> This paragraph could also be found in another publication of the author together with Clara Medina Garcia (Rondelez & Medina García, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Thereby preventing that it will force you to act according to its logic.

<sup>36</sup> Interview respondent O

<sup>37</sup> Interview respondent V and L

<sup>38</sup> Interview respondent D and R

the latter in which they were involved.<sup>39</sup> This could not be seen as a problem typical for the Madrid situation but as a central issue for the construction of movement-parties.<sup>40</sup> However, according to a former member of Ganemos, this really varied from case to case and also depended upon the former strength or weakness of the movement.<sup>41</sup> For example, the feminist movement developed strong ties with Ahora Madrid without weakening its capacity to mobilize. Proof of this are the big women marches in Spain in March (in the context of International Women's Day).

However, some respondents (both academics and members of the confluence) have sincere doubts regarding the strength of the social movements that were embedded in the municipalist confluence in Madrid. According to Cesar Rendueles, professor at Universidad Complutense Madrid, the movements that were at the basis of Ahora Madrid (for instance Movimiento por la Democracia, En Red, Patio Maravillas, Alternativas desde Abajo) were very limited or weak entities.<sup>42</sup> According to him, this is a remark that counts for the whole of Spain: although Spain is '*un país muy movilizador*', the movements are in general very small.<sup>43</sup> The lower mobilization level of social movements after 2013 was already an indicator of a weakening of social movements, a trend that was deepened after related members entered the municipalist confluence in Madrid.<sup>44</sup>

However, it is again important to emphasize that there were great differences between movements: whereas at the start of the legislature of Ahora Madrid, social centres were very weakened, the PAH and its struggle against evictions remained a powerful actor.<sup>45</sup> Some even noticed to be careful by depicting some of these organizations involved in the municipalist project as 'movements'. Nevertheless, Ganemos was an initiative with the aim to gather people from social movements to create a municipalist platform (or movement-party), but once this was accomplished, it was quite obvious that Ganemos was not strongly socially embedded in Madrid. According to a member of Ganemos, the organization on the level of the city quickly disintegrated into different entities of Ganemos at the level of the district or neighbourhoods.<sup>46</sup>

## **(II) The troublesome relationship with movements.**

The transformation or embedding of the municipalist project into a governing logic of managing (and progressive politics) led to tensions inside the city council and the municipalist confluence.<sup>47</sup> Especially with the group of radical councillors linked to Izquierda Unida, Ganemos and Anticapitalistas who interpreted this as mere treason of the municipalist objective to create counter-power and to interpret the presence in the city council as part of a larger movement logic. However, this also led to tensions between the city council and social

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<sup>39</sup> Interview respondent V and L and R

<sup>40</sup> Interview respondent S

<sup>41</sup> Interview respondent M

<sup>42</sup> Interview respondent U

<sup>43</sup> Not everyone agrees with this argument. Some argue that the empirical facts show a more nuanced picture.

<sup>44</sup> Interview respondent M and T

<sup>45</sup> Interview respondent T

<sup>46</sup> Interview respondent J

<sup>47</sup> Interview respondent F

movements.<sup>48</sup> In terms of the real municipalism, the troublesome relationship the city council had with some social movements was a failure to the project itself.

- Firstly, the relationship with the housing movement and in particular with the PAH was very problematic.<sup>49</sup> With Ahora Madrid in power, evictions continued and at the end of the legislature, members of Ganemos (such as Pablo Carmona) tried to prevent an eviction in Lavapiés.
- Secondly, although the city council provided and supported some spaces with the aim of self-governance and creating dialogue (such as EVA in Arganzuela, Playa Data in Tetuán and Salamandra in Moratalaz), there were also occupations of buildings that were not supported by the city council and with whom the relationship was problematic.<sup>50</sup> The best-known example of the latter was La Ingobernable, a social centre that was installed in the former headquarters of UNED and former health centre nearby the Reina Sofía Museum and was evicted the moment the PP entered the city hall in 2019. According to one of the spokespersons of La Ingobernable, this squatted centre needs to be seen as a reaction against the policies of city councillor Nacho Murgui, who developed the 'ordenanza de cooperacion publico-social', but that was unacceptable for some actors like the Red the Espacio the Ciudadanos (a group of different social centres and people occupying spaces out of which REMA (Red de Espacios de Madrid Autogestionados) would emerge in January 2020).<sup>51</sup>
- Thirdly, in the case of the big urban operations such as Madrid Nuevo Norte, the relationship with Plataforma Zona Norte<sup>52</sup> and the councillor Calvo was very hostile.<sup>53</sup> However, this was not a general tendency: other big urban operations (such as Operación Mahou-Calderón, Desarrollos del Sureste) were much less contested.<sup>54</sup> In the case of Operation Mahou-Calderón, a compromise was achieved that was accepted by the neighbourhood and the social movements.<sup>55</sup>
- To mention a few other examples by means of conclusion: there were also tensions with movements or organizations who are in favour for remunicipalizations and according to whom the induced changes were not radical enough.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, there were also tensions with movements defending the rights for migrants.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Interview respondent F

<sup>49</sup> Conversations and processes of reflection with members of Más Madrid and M129 organized by UCM in March 2020; Interview respondent U; G; H, C; I and M

<sup>50</sup> Interview Respondent U; H; B and M

<sup>51</sup> Interview Respondent T; E;

<sup>52</sup> This platform unites several neighbourhood associations (who are part of FRAVM, the federation of neighbourhood association in Madrid) and other organizations for whom the urban project had a direct impact (and also has links with Ecologist movements, Club de Debates Urbanos and the Instituto para la Democracia y el Municipalismo).

<sup>53</sup> Interview Respondent U; C; M

<sup>54</sup> Interview Respondent P; Q

<sup>55</sup> Interview P; K

<sup>56</sup> Interview Respondent C

<sup>57</sup> Interview Respondent B

However, we need to nuance the generality of this remark, because the city council did develop some productive cooperation relations with social movements.<sup>58</sup> The best known examples are the 'asociaciones de padres y madres', the feminist movement, the LGBT movement<sup>59</sup> and organizations such as Ecologistas en Acción regarding themes of sustainable mobility.<sup>60</sup> But also with the network of the social and solidarity economy, with whom a participatory trajectory was set up in order to develop a strategic plan for developing ESS in Madrid, the relationship was very positive.<sup>61</sup> Also important to notice is that with some of these social movements, the city council was literally collaborating in a way that there was an overlap between militants, activists and the labour aspect.<sup>62</sup> It also depended upon particular policies whether the relationship with the movements was productive or not.<sup>63</sup>

### **(III) The conflict or counterpower was geared towards the municipalist project itself.**

The sidelining of the municipalist platform and its embedding in a logic of progressive governance with only a superficial transformation of the institutions, did result paradoxically in the creation of '*contrapoder*' or counterpower. However, instead of creating a strong movement pillar to support the ones who are in the institutions to confront a hostile political-economic environment, a counterpower force emerged that was directed against the municipalist platform itself. In particular against those members of Ahora Madrid who were represented in the council and belonged to the group of the mayor Manuela Carmena. This counterforce did not only contain certain social movements such as the housing movement, Instituto para la Democracia y el Municipalismo, La Ingobernable, Plataforma Zona Norte, and so forth, but also city councillors of Ahora Madrid who were linked to the more critical sectors inside the municipalist platform (such as Rommy Arce of Anticapitalistas, Carlos Sanchez Mato of Izquierda Unida and Pablo Carmona and Montserrat Galcerán of Ganemos).

This internal counterforce was already emerging from the day Manuela Carmena sidelined the municipalist platform and its internal democratic structure and was consolidated with the approval of the Madrid Nuevo Norte proposal. But the tipping point was the dismissal of Carlos Sanchez Mato as councillor of finance at the end of 2017.<sup>64</sup> His exit was the concrete outcome of the loss of the struggle with Montoro, secretary of finance of the national government and consolidated Ahora Madrid's subordination to the (national) framework of austerity governance.<sup>65</sup> From that moment, the members of Izquierda Unida and Ganemos started to think how to cut loose the ties with the group around the mayor (also

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<sup>58</sup> Interview Respondent J. According to this respondent, the delinking between Ahora Madrid (the moment they entered the city council) and the movements out of which it had grown was not total. See also interview with respondent U.

<sup>59</sup> Interview Respondent M

<sup>60</sup> Conversations and processes of reflection with members of Más Madrid and M129 organized by UCM in March 2020; According to respondent A27, Whereas Ecologistas en Acción was a fierce opponent of the new Madrid Nuevo Norte Project, at the same time it cooperated with the city council regarding the pollution of the river Manzanares.

<sup>61</sup> Interview Respondent M

<sup>62</sup> Interview Respondent I

<sup>63</sup> Interview Respondent S

<sup>64</sup> Interview Respondent W; L

<sup>65</sup> This story has been told by Carlos Sanchez Mato himself in his latest book: (Mato & Espinosa, 2019)

named 'the bunker') and how to handle the regional and municipal elections of 2019. Eventually, different initiatives such as Hacer Madrid (initiated by Izquierda Unida) and Bancada Municipalista (initiated by the previous members of Ganemos) and groups that were sidelined such as Anticapitalistas came together in 2019 and formed the alliance of Madrid en Pie Municipalista (MEP). Claiming to represent the 99%, they only obtained less than 5%.<sup>66</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion.

Are these problems intrinsic to the municipalist project or do they entail a problem of implementation? From the viewpoint of the members of Madrid en Pie Municipalista, the latter perspective is true. Otherwise, they would not have presented themselves to the voters in the elections of 2019 against Más Madrid with a copycat of the program of Ahora Madrid in 2015. However, I argue that there are two main problems inside the municipalist project that could be considered as intrinsic, because both are related to the notion of (radical) democracy.

**First**, the 15M movement created promising conditions for the municipalist movement to rely upon and to further consolidate and deepen ties between different kinds of actors around a widely shared rejection of the political-economic order and the longing for a real democracy. One of my initial working hypotheses was that democracy, considered as both an instrument of deliberation (in its horizontal constellation) in which every actor (and his knowledge) is equally considered, can lead to a strengthening of ties not only between citizens but also between different (movement) actors who are active in different spaces, scales and places.<sup>67</sup> However, the moment the question of 'how not to be conducted' changes direction into 'how to be conducted differently', ties between different actors started to disentangle. A widely shared opinion that the political-economic order was not truly democratic was accompanied with different ideas how this 'real democracy' looked like. The longing for a real democracy simultaneously united and divided people. The latter process occurred in particular in the process of the municipalist project in Madrid whose ambition it was to fulfill the ambition of 15M to create that real democracy.

Inside Ahora Madrid, different ideas existed about how to organize 'a real democracy'. In particular, a division existed regarding the following three elements: (1) managing the city versus transforming the city; (2) the necessity or not to build a movement as part of a strategy of counterpower; (3) transforming the institutions by merely upgraded participation tools or through more radical means. At the level of the confluence, internal procedures and principles could not prevent the suspension of the internal democratic structure inside Ahora Madrid which had two major consequences: (1) it led to an internal break-up that had a huge impact for the relationship between social movements and the city council of Madrid; (2) it strengthened the (already existing) internal divides inside the municipalist confluence which had a tremendous impact on the way the city council of Ahora Madrid functioned.

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<sup>66</sup> Madrid en Pie obtained 2,63% <https://resultados.elpais.com/elecciones/2019/municipales/12/28/79.html>

<sup>67</sup> I rely upon the work of (Uitermark, Nicholls, & Loopmans, 2012)

**Second**, central in the municipalist approach is the assumption that democracy as an instrument can be used to rely upon all the knowledge of the involved actors and citizens in imagining and creating an alternative political-economic order. Logically, a blueprint or picture of that alternative is not found in texts on municipalism. Relying on the collective knowledge of the people resolves you not only from the task of proposing a clear and full alternative, but also prevents you from doing any effort to think this through. Doing otherwise would inevitably result in a new elitist project. Nevertheless, inside the municipalist project, the notions of complexity and knowledge (of the people) are insufficiently problematized. While it is true that relatively easy victories can be achieved at the local level, proving that change is possible, this does not (necessarily) apply to complex matters. In the absence of an easy and quick victory, it becomes increasingly hard to mobilize people, and contestation of this complex urban operation remains very marginal. In absence of the distillation of an alternative out of the collective knowledge, the result is that in complex issues the debate is almost entirely conducted by experts (urban experts, economists, mobility experts, critical thinkers, and so forth).

In sum, the two main problems that are intrinsic to the municipalist project are: (1) the problem of obtaining a basic consensus what real democracy entails; (2) how to deal with complexity. Both had a paralyzing effect on the confluence which took two forms. First, a paralysis in the figurative sense understood as the inability to act, move and proceed. In the case of Ahora Madrid, this was exemplified by the emergence of internal resistance and division that launched a strategy of counterpower directed towards the municipalist confluence itself. Losing the city council in the elections of 2019 was the only possible outcome in this scenario. Second, a paralysis in the figurative sense understood as a situation in which no one knows how to escape from or change the status quo of the existing political-economic order. Relying upon the collective knowledge did not work out. However, imagining these as problems of implementation only feeds the paralysis. A lack of blueprint combined with the emergence of expert knowledge instead of collective knowledge in complex matters without questioning the basic assumptions of your project results in a vicious circle: aware of the overrepresentation of experts in the process, inevitably brings you to the starting point of relying upon the collective knowledge (Let's ask the people). The same is true for the first element: without a basic consensus about how real democracy looks like, you will also reproduce the paralysing internal divisions inside the municipalist project.

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