

TRANSFORMATIONAL POLITICS

NEW NETWORKS OF GOVERNANCE

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We urgently require Transformational Politics in response to where humanity finds itself today; in the midst of a climate and biodiversity emergency (IPCC, 2018) that could possibly lead to societal collapse (Watts, 2019). This chapter identifies New Networks of Governance as the base of a growing Transformational Politics, based around increased levels of citizen participation, that could facilitate the urban transition to adequately respond to the existential threat humanity faces today. Regarding Methodology, the author uses a Participatory Action Research approach inspired by Social Ecology principles: Seeking to understand the world by trying to change it, collaboratively and following reflection, with the author learning about, with and from groups active in the cities of Lisbon, Curitiba, Barcelona and Dublin.

Firstly, the problem to be responded to, needs sharp identification. Klein identifies the cause of the current Ecological Crisis as the current economic and political system that governs humankind today; global Capitalism, stating in her 2014 book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Klein, 2014, 27):

Our economic system and our planetary system are now at war. Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a

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contraction in humanity's use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it's not the laws of nature.

Satish Kumar (2009) gives a clear explanation of what Economy actually means, by returning to the Greek roots of the word and outlining its intrinsic connection with Ecology:

Ecology and Economy are derived from three Greek words: oikos, logos, nomos. 'Oikos' means home: a place of relationships between all forms of life, sharing and participating in the evolution of the Earth community. 'Logos' means the knowledge of our planet home, and 'nomos' means management of that home.

Degrowth and Post-growth solutions "Recognize planetary boundaries as the limits economic activity should not transgress" because "What climate breakdown and the rest of the environmental crisis reveal is that perpetual growth is the greatest threat to our wellbeing" (Monbiot, 2018). This reflects Boulding's (1966) prophetic observation over a half century ago that "Anyone who believes in indefinite growth in anything physical, on a physically finite planet, is either mad or an economist".

The day that "permanently changed the political landscape of globalisation", was how Capra (2002, 189) referred to the events of N30, Tuesday 30th of November 1999, when 1000's of activists came together to shut down the first World Trade Organization (WTO) talks in the US, in Seattle. The diversity of actors use of Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA) defined a new way of doing politics, as Hawken (2000) later recounted:

"They were human rights activists, labour activists, indigenous people, people of faith, steel workers, and farmers. They were forest activists, environmentalists, social justice workers, students, and teachers... They were speaking on behalf of a world that has not been made better by globalization".

This event brought the "globalization" debate to the mainstream and while there were some victories in the following years, the economic system continued expand mostly unchallenged. On June 7th 2019 Portugal's Parliament declared "Climate Emergency", following the example set by the UK and Irish governments in previous weeks. This comes directly from the sharp upsurge of two new intertwined global climate activism movements; School Strike for Climate, inspired by the actions of Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swedish girl with autism, and the

UK based NVDA movement; Extinction Rebellion (XR). A growing moment of youth activism saw 4 million people participate in global “Climate Strikes” in 2019 on September 20, followed by 7.6 million on September 27th (350.org). The long hoped for Transformational Wave seems to be finally happening. Now we need a clear idea of what winning might actually look like.

Municipalist Solutions - New networks of governance for citizen-led Ecocities

Recognizing that “modern cities are a product of the oil age” (Brown, 2006, 36) we need to establish what a Degrowth scenario means for future communities. With current trends continuing, The UN (2016) predicts that by 2050 up to 75% of humanity is expected to live in cities. Many see current models of Sustainable Cities somewhat limited and advocate Regenerative Cities (Girardet, 2014) instead to fix the damage already done. This paper advocates Ecocities, based on scaling up the existing Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) model, to where “every village is an ecovillage, every city a green city” (Joubert, 2017) without losing their 3 core values: 1) Being rooted in local participatory processes 2) Integrating social, cultural, economic and ecological dimensions in a whole systems approach to sustainability 3) Actively restoring and regenerating their social and natural environments. Such a model is based on a Creative Descent Strategy, or Earth Stewardship, whereby humankind responds to the “Hydrocarbon Twins” (Hopkins, 2008) of Climate Change and Peak Oil to create Post Carbon futures, fixing ecosystems and creating communities whose objective is to learn to live collectively within Earth’s limits. GEN formed in 1995 after an international Ecovillage conference in Findhorn, Scotland and includes over 10.000 communities, representing all continents. They envision a world of empowered citizens and communities, designing and implementing pathways to a regenerative future, while building bridges of hope and international solidarity. By 2001, GEN obtained consultative status at the UN Economic and Social Council and in 2004 they created their global education network, GAIA Education. Kosha Joubert updated The Ecovillage concept in 2017 to highlight it could include urban communities. GEN has two projects in urban districts that offer insights into how future ecocities might be organised, both are classified as urban rejuvenation projects and both have an inherently political component: Los Angeles EcoVillage in the US and Christiania Freetown in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Municipalism can facilitate such a model to be scaled up in today's cities; a fractal-like Citizen-led network, consisting of communities within communities; confederations of clusters of ecological neighbourhoods, communicating with each other non-hierarchically, organizing both horizontally and vertically through local assemblies. Where any node within the structure is both local and global at all times. Municipalism as both structure and process was developed by Murray Bookchin from the philosophical solution he called Social Ecology, believing organised groups of active citizens are the ones best suited to manage local affairs with decisions moving upward from the local to the global, a social reconstruction along ecological lines to create a truly ecological society. For Bookchin, ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems, due to an aggressive hierarchical and exploitative class society that exploits for power and profit through economic growth, gender oppressions, ethnic domination and corporate, state, and bureaucratic incursions. His solution is to confront these forms of domination "by collective action and by major social movements that challenge the social sources of the ecological crisis, not simply by personalistic forms of consumption and investment that often go under the oxymoronic rubric of "green capitalism." (Bookchin, 2006, 22).

But no ethics or vision of an ecological society, however inspired, can be meaningful unless it is embodied in a living politics. By politics, I do not mean the statecraft practiced by what we call politicians – namely, representatives elected or selected to manage public affairs and formulate policies as guidelines for social life. To social ecology, politics means what it meant in the democratic polis of classical Athens some two thousand years ago: direct democracy, the formulation of policies by directly democratic popular assemblies, and the administration of those policies by mandated coordinators who can easily be recalled if they fail to abide by the decision of the assembly's citizens. (Bookchin, 2006, 48).

This living politics, goes by different names in different locations in today's world. It can be seen as a grassroots democracy at a global scale, as Finley (2017) notes:

A growing number of people in the world are proposing "communalism": the usurpation of capitalism, the state, and social hierarchy by the way of town, village, and neighborhood assemblies and federations. Communalism is often used interchangeably with "municipalism", "libertarian municipalism" and "democratic confederalism".

Social Ecology took a surprising turn in the last decade, when Bookchin's writings were read by the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan in Turkey. The Kurdish independence movement (PKK) moved away from their Marxist-Leninist ideas of national liberation to Democratic Confederalism. Due to the political instability in Syria, including the war against ISIS, a giant experiment is underway since 2012 in the mostly Kurdish Northern Syrian region, Rojava. A Feminist and anti-capitalist society has been created (Staal & Hassan, 2015), based around networks of grassroots people's assemblies and co-operatives, or communes, a process called *Tekmil*, (Weller, 2018) who have declared their autonomy from the state, instead building what they refer to as a real democracy. Society is structured in fractal like fashion where communes form confederations with each other across regions. Local assemblies elect representatives at the village or street level and these representatives represent their assembly at the level of the city or region (Figure 1). Weller notes that 1 Municipality is based around 5 districts, 20 neighbourhoods, 150 communes, 2500 families and the assemblies have two co-delegates that represent their group at the upper level, decision making is done through Consensus and voting, in a bottom-up process and women are involved at all levels as equals. A number of committees or workgroups (People, Economy, Health, Women, Youth, Art & Culture, Self-defence, Martyrs, Education, Merchants, Communication) cover daily goings on. The city or region elects representatives to represent them at higher levels. Eleven different committees or institutions facilitate the day-to-day running of the Commune. This is all happening within a vicious multi sided war in Syria, where women's anti-fascist militias fight ISIS alongside male comrades, including international volunteers. Turkey began launching military strikes against the region since in 2018. The future for this experiment of hope is unclear.

A similar fractal like structure forms the base of the *Ecobairro* (Eco neighbourhood) São Paulo project in Brazil, it was one of five "Municipalities in Transition" test pilot projects 2016-18 (Macedo, 2019): From the micro to the macro; the individual, the home, the block, the neighbourhood, the network, based around 8 axis: Politics, Education, Culture, Spirituality, Health, Ecology, Economy, Communication.

Recent occurrences of these forms of participative governance have been seen in colourful acts of disobedience in temporarily occupied zones throughout London and other world cities, thanks to the rapidly growing nonviolent direct-action movement, Extinction Rebellion (XR). Frustrated



Figure 1: Rojava Peoples Parliament, Makhmur, Southern Kurdistan.
Source: Stall, 2016

with the lack of adequate response to climate breakdown (CB) from the UK government, XR formed with the stated aim of using nonviolent civil disobedience to compel government action on CB, biodiversity loss, and the risk of social and ecological collapse. Much XR theory & action plan was built upon XR Co-founder Roger Hallam's fifty pages PDF pamphlet: "How to win! Successful Procedures and Mechanisms for Radical Campaign Groups" (2015), which presented strategies from a broad range of sources, not just the activist realm. In November 2018 XR blockaded five bridges across the Thames River in London for some hours and in April 2019 they occupied five prominent sites in central London for a week and got major media coverage due to 1,130 people being arrested. Sister XR groups formed in other world cities and direct actions continue to grow. XR state they "use participatory democracy processes, such as people's assemblies, in order to model participatory democracy within the movement, generate ideas, gather feedback and make decisions". Assemblies were used throughout the April Rebellion to discuss a wide range of issues, from innovations in democracy and inclusivity to how to end the April Rebellion. In addition, they have a helpful manual on their website. A major inspiration for XR assemblies was Spain.

Lessons from Spain – A feminist democratic revolution growing from the Rebel Cities

The 2008 economic crisis in Spain led to massive austerity cuts, bank repossessions of housing, rise in suicides and a spike in unemployment with youth unemployment rising as high as 56%. Out of this misery and anger a coordinated day of direct action happened in a network of cities throughout Spain on the 15th of May 2011, with Spanish public squares being occupied by the *Indignados* movement (15M), named after the former French resistance fighter Stéphane Hessel's pamphlet *Indignation* (2010). They demanded a complete reboot of how politics was done in Spain, calling for Real Democracy (Castells, 2012; Mason, 2012). The occupations lasted for two months, with the hashtags #SpanishRevolution and #15M used by activists on social media also becoming names for the movement. From the start, there was a continuous occupation of squares all over Spain by the public, to start an open dialogue about how to get out of the economic crisis. 1000's arrived in the squares, formed assemblies, made decisions collectively and slept in the squares. In Barcelona's *Plaça de Catalunya* (Catalonia Square), activists set up infrastructure, tents, a kitchen, information points, had workshops and meetings, and held an open public general assembly every evening. From the start there was a light police presence, which watched but did not interfere, but on May 27th, orders were given to displace the square in the early morning. After six hours of police violence, 147 people were injured, many seriously. Shocking pictures flooded firstly social media, then the mainstream: This resulted in 20,000 people expressing solidarity by retaking the square that day, now more determined than ever.

While initially created by established activist groups and Social Movements, quickly numbers grew at the evening assemblies. People sat around in a circle that could easily expand outward and also allowed for the general public to walk around and listen in. People took turns to come to the speaking area to make points, suggestions, share views, tell personal stories, at the start with a simple loudhailer (Figure 2), but soon replaced by a sound system. It was something special to witness and participate in, to see how quickly members of the public turned from spectators at the edge to participants, it was people from all walks of life, young, old, working, unemployed, man, woman, student, granny, the discussions reflected the diverse, passionate and intense desires for improving things. Online toolkits helped facilitate the process; at the meetings, one person spoke at a time, people listened, there were a series of hand signals to

assist; rolling of index fingers or hands if the speaker was rambling, crossed forearms to indicate blocking a proposal and the waving of open hands to show agreement with a proposal or a quite way to clap. People spoke to the crowd, proposals were made, agreements were made by those in the square and things developed in this way for two months. Although not without disagreements and problems, it was a stunning example of direct democracy in action.



Figure 2: – Democracy in action, Placa Catalunya, Barcelona 2011.
Source: AcampadaBCN (2011)

In terms of infrastructure there were a series of fourteen commissions (Audio-visual, interaction, Activities, Health, Environment, Education, Economy, Content, Extension, Diffusion, International, Legal Issues, Communication, Assembly Preparation), which anybody could participate in, many of which had further sub commissions, to facilitate the quick expansion of the urban phenomenon. Everybody had a role, if they wanted; kitchens were set up, living quarters developed. In a very short period, a self-organized open system transformed the national discussion through a network of citizen led direct actions in the public realm. Castells (2012, 114) referred to this form of urban action in his native Spain as “A Rhizomatic Revolution”, noting how after the initial actions of 15M, the structure multiplied rapidly “Over 100 Spanish cities following suit, triggering a massive occupy movement that spread in a few days to almost 800 cities around the world”. Deleuze & Guattari first developed this philosophical Rhizome concept in their “Capitalism and Schizophrenia”

(1972-1980) project, based on the botanical structure of creeping rootstalks Rhizomes, which grow perpendicular to the force of gravity and have the ability to allow new shoots to grow upwards from new nodal points.

Quickly communicating the rapidly changing 15M reality reinforced the network, which happened in both the digital and physical worlds simultaneously, with pins added on a world map in the info point in *Plaça de Catalunya* acting as a form of rapid constant feedback loop. Castells noted “The emergence of mass self communication offers an extraordinary medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects” (Castells, 2007, 249) and examples of the mutually global and local aspects of these networks were perhaps best expressed between Barcelona and Athens; the 2010 “Peoples of Europe Rise Up” banner unfurled at the ancient Acropolis appeared in 2011 as a handmade placard on Barcelona’s streets. Lastly was the beautiful moment of shared real time communication between the two cities united in the same struggle; a live video transmission between Barcelona’s square and Syntagma square in Athens (Figure 3), taking the Peer to Peer (P2P) concept to Square to Square (S2S), through global solidarity and direct action. Soon after, the Occupy movement erupted in US cities and in 2013 similar citizen mobilizations erupted globally.



Figure 3 – Square to Square (s2s): Barcelona & Athens.
Source: Crimethinc. (2011)

Nobody fully expected the 2011 Spanish Revolution to make the impact it did. Although facilitated extremely well by experienced activists from Social Movements long used to diverse group dynamics, it was the rapid opening up of the common space which truly made it a profoundly successful urban rupture, as more citizens took a stand, made a point or started to actively participate for the first time, in both the real and digital realms together: reading and commenting on new reports, retweeting links to short quickly edited videos, sending messages from the plaza to friends on WhatsApp lists, waving hands or making a statement at the nightly assembly... together in this joined space, or idea, that forms the core of living and acting in the network age, Spain took bold steps into the unknown. Barcelona activist Esther Vivas predicted this process was “the birth of a new movement” (2011), Although it took some time, she was correct: Four years later her city, Barcelona, went through even more profound change, opening up the Common Space even further. While built upon those same forces that gave rise to and grew quickly in 2011, this part of the story has taken things to a completely new level.

In Spain’s 2015 municipal elections eight city councils were won by citizen platforms, outside the traditional political party system, who took decisions collectively through local assemblies. This phenomenon has subsequently been named Spain’s Rebel Cities. The city of Barcelona saw the election of a woman as mayor for the first time in over 2,000 years; she is the first member of the Indignados to win public office. Ada Colau was the leader of the anti-eviction group *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH) (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages), whose direct actions included blocking evictions and occupations of banks, for which Colau was removed and arrested by riot squad in 2013, two years later she became their boss. The political organization she is part of, *Barcelona en Comú* (BEC) (Barcelona together), work on a Municipalist only platform, seeking power only at the city level, based on a set of related characteristics (Shea Baird & Roth, 2017): 1) Distinctive political organization reflects diversity of local political landscape 2) Open and participatory decision-making processes 3) Organizational structure is relatively horizontal (for example, based on neighbourhood assemblies) and guides elected representatives 4) Capacity for institutional action depends on strong, organized movements in the streets that push elected leaders. Their structure and work method is very much a continuation of the earlier groups, movements and processes they have grown from, BEC claim a feminist democratic revolution is underway, to further open up the Common Space in Barcelona based on deep communication processes that

allows for a city that listens. They have occupied the institutions of the mayor's office, dispersing power by opening them up to the various assemblies in the city neighbourhoods (Figure 4), where the members of the mayor's team and residents discuss plans and projects that affect them, thereby residents are co-creating their neighbourhoods of the future, based on an open participative planning process.

Writing a half-year before her election win, Colau (2014) predicted: "Citizens have finally had enough and are getting down to work. A democratic revolution is sweeping the country which aims, not only to kick the mafia out of our institutions, but also to change the rules of the game so that this can never happen again", adding shortly after the victory;

"We think the city governments are key for democratic revolution, to begin governing, with the people, in a new way. But on the other hand, we're very aware that the real change must be global, that one city alone cannot solve all the problems we're facing, many of which are global because today the economy does not have borders" (Colau, 2015)



Figure 4 – Feminist assembly in Gràcia neighbourhood.
Source: Ikimilikiliklik (2017).

To help facilitate further global municipal change, BEC organized a three day international Municipalist summit in Barcelona in 2017 called

Fearless Cities. It had participants from every continent of the planet and was divided along 3 lines (Fearless Cities, 2017):

- 1) Work as a global Municipalist network: Share tools, knowledge and experiences with Municipalist movements from around the world.
- 2) Feminize politics: Develop new ways of organizing based on horizontal collaboration, collective intelligence and the politics of everyday life.
- 3) Stop the far right: Combat the politics of hate and fear with local policies to reduce inequality and promote the common good.

This global municipalist movement seeks to assist all global cities and communities create and, or, develop local municipalist projects and political processes to allow citizens have a greater say in what type of city or community they wish to live in. Inspired by Barcelona's feminist democratic revolution, it is growing rapidly, in 2018 follow up conferences happened in Central Europe, Eastern Europe, New York and Chile.

Conclusions

Avoiding humanities destruction rests on our collective ability to fix our cities. Cities have become the frontline where appropriate action is quickly needed to avert climate crisis and build resilience to deal with future shocks. The term Sustainable Cities is long established, but struggles to embrace newer concepts that cities must deal with today, such as resilience and regeneration. Ecocities could replace the Sustainable Cities term by scaling up the GEN ecovillage methodology, practice and global community to form a global Ecocity network, based around the political process of active citizenship. The Ecocity challenge is to understand how such a vision can be implemented globally in today's massive cities, Municipalism offers solutions here, using citizen-led processes based around a fractal like structure for bottom-up organisation; Rojava, Barcelona, Sao Paulo already offer us glimpses.

To get the ecological part correct in our communities and planet, we need to get the economic part correct, both are intrinsically connected. Ecological economic systems live within the limits of life on earth and not on the model of endless growth. The current system of global capitalism under the present form of Neoliberalism is not compatible with such a sustainable system; therefor an end to, or break from, capitalism is

required. The base of the required transition centres on reconstructing our relationships with energy, most of all; oil. An Ecocity model offers a PostCapitalist solution for the planet, whose pathways are based on Creative Descent responses to the twin challenges of global warming and peak oil, as being developed by many groups today, including Degrowth solutions.

Profound changes are currently underway, driven by new forms of activism such as the Fridays for Future movement and Extinction Rebellion (XR). Massive actions have already forced some governments to declare climate emergency, which is highly commendable, but concrete pathways are required to bring about the system change that is so urgently required to respond to Climate Breakdown. If XR can continue to grow and they can develop a global network of local people's assemblies, by incorporating the municipalist structures described here, there is a chance to bring about a profound new way of doing politics, using both the digital and the real world tools and spaces to create New Networks of Governance, which can further grow to facilitate this Transformational Wave.

The future is (Y)ours!

COVID 19 Postscript

Since mid-March 2020, all has changed, changed utterly. Writing now at the end of April, there have been over 3 million cases reported and over 200,000 deaths accredited to the COVID virus (with surely more unreported). As academics, in many of our work networks we felt the line between us and them was eroded, we are all in this difficult moment to varying degrees. Early on, with our ECOLISE network (European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability) we created a wiki page in our Knowledge Commons, as a resource to assist our communities, friends and families make sense of things (ECOLISE, 2020). Rather than focusing on all that is worrying, we focused on some key areas; what practical community responses were emerging, such as feeding ourselves and listing tools, networks and databases of what can be done locally, thinking translocally, what can work well in one context, might be replicable throughout the community. Many emerging solutions are crowdsourced and rely on citizen participation to quickly grow. Without any prior experience, people could assist at whatever level they felt was appropriate, such as contributing to,

or adding translations for “The Coronavirus Tech Handbook” (from a political hackspace in London; Newspeak House) or the “Alone Together Handbook” from Extinction Rebellion. Monbiot's subsequent article, arising from his earlier tweet, identified and celebrated many of these acts in “The horror films got it wrong. This virus has turned us into caring neighbours” (Monbiot, 2020). Struggling to make sense of things, led to six categories for our wiki entry, or Perspectives; Solidarity / Cities and Covid-19 / Gender, Class, Minority / Ecological / Economic / Political.

One positive aspect arising from this difficult and dangerous moment, the opportunity within the crisis, has been the ability for individuals, work colleagues and projects to learn new skills, especially to communicate. While people are under self-isolation, groups are having to use online communication tools for conferences, music festivals, family calls, quizzes, choral singing... For many, this is experimental territory, much learning by praxis. With our ECOLISE and UrbanA (Urban Arenas for Sustainable and Just Cities) projects, we have been experimenting with this “blended arenas” format and feel our network members’ contributions can help wider communities, especially Nenad Maljković’s “For a blended event, BYOD” (2019) and DRIFT’s “The art of connecting online: 7 social innovation insights” (2020). Lastly, what Corona has really shown us, is that there is no “going back to normal” because that “normal” was the problem. It’s time to build the degrowth regenerative future. Adapt or Die!

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