



**ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG**
NEW YORK OFFICE

MUNICIPALISM IN SPAIN

From Barcelona to Madrid, and Beyond

By Vicente Rubio-Pueyo

Table of Contents

A Sea Change in the Politics of Spain (and Beyond). By the Editors.....	1
---	---

Municipalism in Spain

From Barcelona to Madrid, and Beyond.....	2
--	----------

By Vicente Rubio-Pueyo

Historical Antecedents.....	4
The Municipalist Method and Guanyem Barcelona.....	6
Municipalist Confluences Across Spain.....	8
Between Urgency and Transformation.....	9
Overflow and Electoral Success.....	11
The Feminization of Politics.....	13
Debt, Recovery of Social Rights, and Re-municipalization.....	14
Towards a New Urban Model.....	15
A Democratic City: Participation and Governance.....	17
“Culture Wars”	17
International and National Networks.....	18
The Shape of a Left to Come?.....	19
Power in Experimentation.....	21

Published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office, December 2017.

City Series, #4

Editors: Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg

Address: 275 Madison Avenue, Suite 2114, New York, NY 10016

Email: info@rosalux-nyc.org; **Phone:** +1 (917) 409-1040

With support from the German Foreign Office.

The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is an internationally operating, progressive non-profit institution for civic education. In cooperation with many organizations around the globe, it works on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development, and peaceful conflict resolution.

The New York Office serves two major tasks: to work around issues concerning the United Nations and to engage in dialogue with North American progressives in universities, unions, social movements, and politics.

www.rosalux-nyc.org

A Sea Change in the Politics of Spain (and Beyond)

In Spain's municipal elections of May 2015, a constellation of new political forces emerged. For the first time in almost 40 years of Spanish democracy, the country's major cities would no longer be ruled by either the Partido Popular (PP) or the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), or any of the other long established political forces, but by new "Municipalist Confluences" such as Ahora Madrid, Barcelona en Comú, and Cadiz Si Se Puede, to name just a few.

While each of these Municipalist Confluences is the product of specific local contexts, with their own languages, traditions, and cultures, together they represent the possibility of a sea change in the politics of Spain and beyond. Especially in light of the existence of a strong, post-Francoist right, which has committed itself to the "culture war" of Spanish nationalism, these confluences point toward the possibility of creating a new political subject capable of breaking the impasse that has characterized so much of national politics in the age of austerity.

Bringing together political parties new and old, nationwide movements and hyper-local social initiatives, as well as a mass of disaffected voters with long-organized neighborhood groups, these confluences are a sort of radical experiment conducted at the municipal level. They have not only restructured established political processes and practices, but also shifted notions of power in order to grant traditionally underrepresented groups, including women, access to the political domain. The election of Ada Colau is a case in point. As the first woman to hold the office of Mayor of Barcelona, Colau's political work highlights the connections between gender equality and other forms of social, political, and economic justice.

Author Vicente Rubio-Pueyo is a professor at Fordham University. He has written extensively, both in academic contexts and in the press, on the current social and political conjuncture in Spain, and on political forces including Podemos and the Municipalist Confluences. A Spaniard living in the US for more than ten years now, Vicente has also been active in building connections and mutual understanding between these forces and their counterparts in North America.

In this excellent study—the forth piece of our office's "City Series"—he analyzes the Municipalist Confluences, how they came to be, and where they can take politics in Spain and beyond. Drawing on a deep knowledge of history, combined with astute theoretical and political analysis, Rubio-Pueyo provides an international audience with everything it needs to know about municipalism in Spain. His work brings us up to the minute, and is sure to have value for years to come.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg
Co-Directors of New York Office, December 2017*

Municipalism in Spain

From Barcelona to Madrid, and Beyond

By Vicente Rubio-Pueyo

The 2017 Catalan independence referendum has been called “undemocratic,” a “power grab,” and even a “coup d’état” in international media. No matter the specific terminology, the referendum as well as the dispute over its democratic legitimacy indicate that Spanish political culture is undergoing a deep transformation.

However, the timing of Catalonia’s move toward secession from Spain was not coincidental. Two years earlier, during the May 2015 municipal elections, a series of new political forces had emerged that were aligned with neither of the two major parties in Spain. For the first time in the almost forty years of Spanish democracy, the major cities in the country were no longer going to be ruled by either the Partido Popular (PP) or the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), or any of the other long established political forces, but by “Municipalist Confluences” such as Ahora Madrid, Barcelona en Comú, and Cádiz Sí Se Puede, to name just a few.

Located outside the basic bipartisan structure of the Spanish political system, the appearance of the Municipalist Confluences represents an alternative in a political landscape that is marked by a long-standing tension between the centralist Spanish state on the one hand and a number of nationalist or “independentist” projects on the other. The confluences are the products of specific local contexts, with their own languages, traditions, and cultures, and their composition is the result of a highly dynamic geometry of different political forces and elements.

Despite much international noise about the worst constitutional crisis in Spain’s post-Francoist history, the historical relevance of the Municipalist Confluences predates the most recent events in Catalonia. The tensions between parallel nationalist projects in Spain, with their particular articulation as territorial conflicts, can be traced back to the 1970s. Ever since, the debate over nationalism versus independence has structured Spanish political discourse, thus effectively foreclosing other important conversations concerning economic and social justice. Stuck between the options of nationalism or secession, it became clear that a third position—in support of Catalonia’s right to self-determination albeit not under the form of the current referendum—was much needed, but that it could not be achieved through popular mobilization in the streets alone.

Like the rise of Podemos, the emergence of the Municipalist Confluences is very much related to popular street protests and the political climate of 2011 with its anti-austerity movements, most importantly Movimiento 15M, also known as Movimiento de los Indignados (Indignant Movement). While Podemos may be considered the most powerful initiative of the time, it does not exist in isolation. Indeed, in some cases, such as in Barcelona, the discussions towards building a municipalist force started well before Podemos was launched. Yet, both Podemos and municipalism should be considered translations of the 2011 popular movements into the institutional political domain, with each initiative following its own particular strategy. One of



Image 1: Map of Municipalist Confluences, as of February 2015. Source: Diagonal.

the most important differences between the two political forces is that Podemos, for various reasons—including lack of energy and resources for developing local party candidacies—focused its energy overwhelmingly on the national and regional levels. But Podemos was also aware that processes “of confluence” were already in place at the local level, and in many cases later sought to join them.

The process of “confluence” took off at the end of 2013, at a moment when many of the participants in the movements of 2011 were experiencing a generalized sense of exhaustion. An increase in police repression and prosecution—manifested, for example, in the “Gag Law,” which heavily penalized non-permitted demonstrations and other forms of public activism—underlined the obstacles in achieving meaningful political change through popular

mobilization in the streets. As a result, not only activist circles but also a majority of the less politically active population began to feel disenchanted. Despite the massive sympathy towards the 15M movement and its demands (which received the support of around 80% of the Spanish population, according to polls at the time), and after having witnessed the most intense mobilizations in decades, the street protests had been unable to stop the austerity measures of the People’s Party’s government. It was then that many activists and political networks began to talk about the possibility of an “institutional assault.”

This “institutional assault” relied on three distinct approaches. In chronological order, the first one was the techno-political approach favored by Red Ciudadana / Partido X (Citizen Network / X-Party), which was an initial

attempt to translate the open methods and post-ideological elements of the internet culture into principles for political organization. Although not very successful politically—it gained only 100,000 votes in the European elections, in which Podemos surged—and now revamped as a citizen's rights and anti-corruption network, Red Ciudadana / Partido X served as a sort of laboratory for the development of online participatory tools (and sim-

ilar technical innovations), which were later incorporated by the other new political forces. The second one was the municipalist approach discussed here, which was first developed in Barcelona, where it took the form of citizen manifestos. The last approach was the populist hypothesis of Podemos, launched in January 2014, which has now become the third political force in the country alongside the PP and PSOE.

Historical Antecedents

If municipalism in Spain seems to have appeared for the first time in the specific conjuncture emerging from 15M, and as only one among several political possibilities, its conceptual and historical roots reach far deeper.

Conceptually speaking, Bookchin's "Libertarian Municipalism," Lefebvre's "Right to the City," or Harvey's "Rebel Cities" are frequently invoked when describing municipalism's theoretical framework. However, even if these concepts are part of a widely shared political vocabulary among many movement participants, they cannot be applied mechanically but need to be adapted to specific political situations and collective visions. Indeed, to pretend that these concepts served as some sort of ready-made formula would be a case of idealism. On the contrary, it is precisely under the light of a specific political situation that certain concepts, traditions, languages and methods acquire a new and fruitful sense.

Ahora en Común (Now In Common) have been the keywords that gave name to the new political formations of municipalism. They express both a sense of urgency and a long-term political vision. *Ahora* refers to the immediate need for the recovery of basic social rights affected by

the crisis and the austerity measures that have swept the country since 2008. It calls for fast solutions to the crises in housing, public health-care, and public education in the short term. *En común*, referencing the now widely known concept of the commons, stands for a much broader political imaginary based on a recovery of a basic sense of politics in the long term. Politics *en común* is an activity not separated from the people, but one where citizens' participation constitutes the cornerstone of the political process.

Historically speaking, local and municipal politics have always occupied an essential place within Spanish political structure. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, municipalism—to varying degrees in combination with anarchist and federalist traditions—has shaped many social and political initiatives. As a radical democratic project that has attempted to redefine the structure of the state, it has pushed a bottom-up federalist model with the municipality as its basic political unit. As such, municipalism poses a challenge not only to centralist tendencies, but because of its focus on economic questions, democracy, and its appeal to the working classes, it also remains distinct from the often bourgeois-driven nationalist projects that have emerged, for example, in Catalonia

and the Basque Country in the late 19th century. Municipalism represents a real alternative to what Ortega once called Spain's perpetual "invertebrate" condition—one rooted in democratic and egalitarian concerns rather than merely territorial ones.

While local politics condensed many of the lines of conflict that traversed the country—monarchy vs. republic, centralism vs. federalism, bourgeoisie vs. proletariat, and formal democracy vs. radical democracy¹—municipalism offered other options.

During the so-called Transition (ca. 1973 to 1982), local, self-organized initiatives sprang up everywhere, fighting for access to basic social rights and services like housing, sewage, health-care, and education at the neighborhood and community level. They were the more practical, locally anchored counterparts to the broader anti-Francoist movement. This network of organizations and initiatives undoubtedly played an important role in the first municipal elections of the new Spanish democracy in 1979, in which the left—that is, a coalition of PSOE and the Communist Party of Spain—won the major cities of the country. Ultimately, this electoral success proved to be bittersweet, however, because it marked the beginning of a process of cooptation of the movement and an increasing deactivation of its initiatives. In addition, the achievements of some of the movements' demands as well as reforms in the local administration, alongside the professionalization of many of the movement's cadres, soon gave way to a more technocratic approach to neighborhood concerns and demands.²

As a specific strategy towards local electoral politics, municipalism has gathered many ex-

periences over the past few decades. This is especially true in Catalonia, where the density of municipalism's social fabric, associative texture, and cultural identity brought about multiple local candidacies. While many of these have been active since the Seventies, they have also proven capable of adapting to new waves of mobilization and influences. Taking the form of *candidaturas de unidad popular* (popular unity candidacies),³ these initiatives gave birth to the left independentist party of the same name (CUP), which played a crucial role in the discussions surrounding the referendum in Catalonia.

Aside from these historical references, the emergence of municipalism in Spain is also linked to other, more immediate problems, which Spanish cities have been facing recently. According to authors like Isidro López and Emmanuel Rodríguez, much has to do with the effects of globalization. After Spain had joined the European Economic Community in 1986, and later the European Union, the Spanish Economic Model became inscribed into the international labor market, so that the Spanish economy now depended mainly on the real estate, construction, and tourism sectors, which gave primacy to finance capital and the banks.

This, alongside the need of cities to establish their place within the flow of international capital, had a massive impact on urban development. Investing heavily in infrastructure and real estate, an urban model emerged based on the construction of spectacular architecture, often in response to large-scale events, such as international exhibitions or conventions. The transformation of Barcelona in the lead-up to the Olympic Games of 1992 is probably the most famous case, and in a way it became the model for other cities in Spain that pursued a globalized, cosmopolitan, and neoliberal model of

1 Observatorio Metropolitano de Madrid. 2014. *La apuesta municipalista. La democracia empieza en lo cercano*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.

2 Manuel Castells' classic *The City and the Grassroots. A Cross-cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* devotes one of its chapters to Madrid's neighborhood movement.

3 Gema Ubasart. 2012. "Municipalismo alternativo y popular. ¿Hacia una consolidación de las tesis del nuevo localismo y la politización del mundo local?" *Revista de Estudios Políticos* 157: 135-162.

urban design: The steel from the navy yards of once-industrial Bilbao was forged into the shiny curves of the Guggenheim Museum in 1997; Valencia opened a costly City for the Arts and Sciences in 1998; Zaragoza built new bridges and pavilions for an International Exhibition in 2008; and many other cities opened their own museums, convention centers, or sports stadiums. These are only the most visible signs of a more profound urban transformation that involved the turn to a service economy, the exploitation of migrant labor, the distribution of specialized economic functions across different parts of the city, and, relatedly, the segregation of city neighborhoods according to economic criteria.

At the same time, the increasing privatization of public programs and services continued. Madrid and Valencia, for example, turned into laboratories of a certain Spanish-style neoliberalism during long-term conservative governments. If the Spanish administrative structure grants, at least formally, a significant degree of autonomy to the municipal administration, the overlap of

different levels of administration (local, regional, and national), combined with the pressure exerted by the financial interests in real estate, led to systemic corruption. This was visible mostly through the establishment of what became known as “growth machines”—“virtuous” circles created out of city dependency on rezoning as a main source of direct income, in which financial interests align with local political and economic elites under the pretext of growth as the ultimate goal. In a way, the growth machines can be considered a postmodern version of the Spanish *caciquismo*, a form of local oligarchic control that is both economic and political in nature. The results were generalized corruption and ecological damage as well as a disproportionate growth of some parts of the city versus others.⁴ These developments found their institutional rationale in New Public Management dogmas: outsourcing and privatization of services; individualized outreach to citizens through a customer service approach; stimulation of public-private partnerships; corporate governance; and other tenets of market ideology.

The Municipalist Method and Guanyem Barcelona

Rebel Cities, the Right to the City, the Commons, the rejection of neoliberal policies toward urban growth—all these, as well as many other ideas and practices, were important ingredients in the formation of the municipalist method. Based on these frameworks, a number of research initiatives—such as the Observatorio DESC (Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Observatory) or activist research collectives like the Observatorio Metropolitano, but also alternative publishing houses such as Traficantes de Sueños or self-education programs like Nociones Comunes—were key to processing and elaborating these theoretical references. Integrating them with more immediate concerns on the ground and translating them

into political proposals and strategies, these and similar initiatives have provided much of the critical analysis and technical knowledge later incorporated into the Municipalist Confluences.

While the diversity of local contexts and different forces that are active in each city can make it difficult to summarize and synthesize the various processes that have led to the formation of the vocabulary and elements of practice exist.⁵

4 For a more detailed account on Spanish economy and the impact of the 2008 crisis, see López and Rodríguez. “The Spanish Model.” *New Left Review* 69, May-June 2011.

5 A good summary can be found in the document *How to Win Back the City En Comú*, published by Barcelona en Comú’s International Relations office, March 2016.

These revolve around the key concepts of confluence, new leaderships, and overflow (*desborde*).

Two main purposes animated the use of the confluence method. On the one hand, there was the intention to provide an organizational form that was able to remain open not only to parties and organizations, but also to ordinary citizens. In this sense, the confluence tries to move beyond the logic of the usual electoral coalition, which is based on the assumption that the sum of its parts is an immediate given and in which only pre-existing organized entities are represented. The political landscape opened up by the 15M movement deeply questioned this assumption. If the situation in Spain can be considered a crisis of both shared political narratives and traditional political identities, the logic of the confluence provides the possibility of producing new, unexpected realignments that are no longer structured strictly along a left-right axis.

On the other hand, the confluences were also proposed more specifically as an alternative to a more traditional “left front” strategy, which could have driven the new forces back into the traditional framework. This indicates the profound novelty of the confluences as political initiatives and a big part of their appeal was precisely that they went beyond established political identities and limits. Without the emerging political culture of the 15M movement, these processes would likely have followed more traditional itineraries, without achieving such important electoral successes.

The logic of the confluence also required a rethinking of political leadership. Given that the demarcation of the political terrain is an attribute of power—and that power has the ability not only to name reality, but also to structure the field and terms of the political debate—when confronted with a new emergent social force, power’s first instinct is to ask: “Who are you, and where do you come from?” Ada Colau, former speaker of the Plataforma de Afectados

por la Hipoteca (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages, or PAH), first attempted to answer this question on the night of the “Guanyem Barcelona” citizen platform launch in September 2014 by asking back: “¿Qui Som?” (Who are we?)

Colau’s question succinctly summarizes a whole set of intersecting social issues driving the activities and demands of this Guanyem initiative: women underrepresented in the political domain but overrepresented in the invisible labor of care; neighbors fighting for the maintenance of basic rights and services; struggling working-class and unemployed people taking public transportation to precarious jobs or reduced social services offices; educators and nurses defending basic elements of social welfare; migrants in search for a more hospitable city without repression and detention centers; experienced municipal public servants demanding a fair and transparent use of public institutions and an acknowledgment of their capacities; diverse familial groupings denouncing the criminalization of the personal choices they made when building their relationships; children with specific needs, desires, and imagination; elderly people and retirees hoping for an assurance of their well-being and the recognition of their experiences. Bringing these diverse realities and subjectivities together, the initial Guanyem Manifesto was aimed at the creation of a “citizen platform” to “rescue democracy” and to create “new instruments of social articulation and political intervention where both people already organized and those who are beginning to mobilize can meet.”

In terms of new forms of leadership, the impulse behind the manifesto was “a confluence candidacy, with a clear winning, majoritarian, purpose. A candidacy capable of inspiring, and of being present in neighborhoods, workplaces, cultural milieu, and which can allow us to transform institution for the people’s own good.”⁶

⁶ The complete manifesto can be read in Spanish and Catalan at barcelonaencomu.cat.

For this reason, Guanyem's initial proposal excluded political parties and organizations, but not the participation of individual party members. Later, however, political groupings such as Podemos, Iniciativa Per Catalunya Verds (Initiative for Catalonia Greens), Esquerra Unida i Alternativa (Catalonia's United Left), and Procés Constituent (a grassroots assembly movement for a new constitution and the right of Catalonia to self-determination) became parts of the confluence. Meanwhile, due to unexpected circumstances, the name of the platform had to be changed to Barcelona en Comú.⁷

Given that the composition of every confluence candidacy is determined by specific local forces and actors, Ada Colau immediately became a leading figure in Barcelona due to her previous experience in the PAH, which lent her candidacy both legitimacy and popularity.

More significantly, however, this localized approach gave independent figures and the more activist social movement sectors of the confluence a certain if largely symbolic hegemony of the project, which the parties nevertheless accepted without question.

Municipalist Confluences Across Spain

This also meant, however, that the political map was different in other places, where the confluences took on different forms. In Madrid, for example, an activist told me, "We don't have an Ada, and that makes things more difficult." It meant that social center activists, together with participants in the Madrid PAH and neighborhood associations that were loosely attached to previous initiatives like Movimiento por la Democracia had to figure out how to carry the intensity of the 15M mobilization cycle into a new phase.

On June 21, 2014, around 300 activists gathered at the Reina Sofia Museum for a meeting convened under the slogan: "Democracy Begins Close to You. New Political Architectures for the Citizens of Madrid." It was at this point that Ganemos Madrid was created. Its first political interlocutor was Podemos, while other forces such as Equo (Green Party) joined later. After an

intense internal crisis, Madrid's United Left decided not to join, although most of the younger members of its leadership left the party and joined the platform, which by then had been renamed Ahora Madrid.

The formation of other confluences followed similar patterns: the gathering of different forces, parties, and activist groups; the development of a common framework of principles, norms, and procedures; the holding of internal primaries to elect candidates; and, after the consensual emergence of leading figures, voting in open primaries. Each participating element in a particular confluence had varying degrees of influence over the confluence as a whole. For example, in Zaragoza most of the in-person assemblies were dominated by the United Left, which was the biggest force in numerical terms. The participation mechanisms and the whole online infrastructure, however, were generated and maintained by the more "movementist" side of the confluence. This gave place to tensions, but also to a diversity of languages and practices in different areas of activity as well as to distinct relations with diverse audiences.

⁷ In August 2014, when promoters of Guanyem Barcelona registered the party with the Spanish Interior Ministry, they were informed that a party with the same name had been registered two weeks earlier. As they found out, this "ghost party" was registered by three persons, and with important procedural irregularities pointing to an acquiescence, or even complicity, on the part of the Interior Ministry.

The logic behind the confluences is, of course, an organizing process, but it is not one that is under the control of a single actor. While decisions have to be made and paths need to be followed, the confluences pay attention to the process itself, allowing them to stay open and in touch with their surroundings, so that ordinary citizens who may want to join can do so at any time. It is about organizing and planning specific goals and outcomes just as much as it is about allowing for the possibility of the unexpected—the overflow.

As is easy to imagine, these tensions between formal and informal decision-making processes were also reflected in the process of the internal primaries for the election of candidates. One of the main debates centered on the counting method as well as specific voting procedures, in particular the issue of whether voters should choose among (open or closed) pre-established lists or among individual candidates. The first option favored pre-existing formations while the second offered, at least in principle, a more open approach; in practice, however, it also at times appeared to favor more famous individuals.

In general, most of the confluences used open lists, which were considered a compromise and a method that allowed for more internal diversity. As for the counting method, “Dowdall” was the preferred choice. According to the Dowdall method, the vote is broken down proportionally between the candidates in order of preference: one

point for the first candidate on the ballot; one-half point for the second candidate; one-third for the third, etc. The only condition to vote in the internal primaries was to be a registered user on the confluence’s website. As was the case with Podemos until recently, there is no formal procedure to become a member of the organization.

From an organizational point of view, the confluences represent a potential departure from the traditional party system in Spain particularly and Europe more broadly, bringing them closer to the American version of party politics. In the United States, where parties are not so much considered predefined units with established political identities that are in accordance with rigid party lines, the party can comprise a cluster of different (and at times even conflicting) interests and constituencies, which are represented by political figures and currents that must cooperate and negotiate constantly to adapt to new contexts.

Seen this way, the party does not serve the monolithic affirmation of an identity. Rather, as a broad space that is traversed by diverse communities and languages, the party takes on a sort of “monstrous” form, where old and new practices and structures meld together into a new formation. Of course, the pressures of the media and the need to manage expectations often constrain these more experimental dimensions of political initiatives, but they indicate the potential for new developments.⁸

Between Urgency and Transformation

Still, how do we meld together this diversity of actors and ingredients? In most confluences, the initial step was the participatory elaboration of a code of ethics, which later had to be signed by all the actors involved. This code encompassed a number of principles and practices concern-

ing the democratization of public services, the need for listening to citizens’ demands and for accountability (along the lines of the Zapatista

⁸ For example, see Fernando Sabin, Ana Méndez, and Pablo Bartolomé. “Reflexiones municipalistas: comunidades, institución y gobierno.” *Diagonal*. July 23, 2016.

motto to *mandar obedeciendo*, or “rule by obeying”), and a call for measures of financial transparency and against corruption.⁹

This participatory ethos was deepened throughout the process of elaborating the electoral program. It centered on the confluences’ need to urgently address the most pressing issues, in particular the effects of austerity measures, while also pushing for new models of city governance that offered a sustainable political vision on transparency and citizen participation. In other words, the key was to identify a pragmatic way out of austerity in the short term while beginning to put in place the building blocks for a new urban model, in direct opposition to the neoliberal one, for the long term.

Despite their local specificities, the programs of the confluences usually share two main characteristics. The first is a visionary and antagonistic, or non-reformist, reformism. This was a conscious attempt of avoiding the thematic divisions of the existing administrative structure and the established council offices. Thus, instead of operating within the framework of conventional spheres such as the economy, public services, social programs, etc., we find categories such as “A City for Life,” “A City in Common,” or “New City Model,” which highlight connections between social issues, ecology, and gender justice. Indeed, if “every bylaw is political,” as many people in municipalist circles say, the confluences’ programs have also proposed to introduce social, economic, environmental, and gender justice criteria into the bid specifications for any public contract. This approach to a city’s problems raises new possibilities by drawing links between otherwise disparate concerns with all the attached implications for policy making.

Generally speaking, the programs tend to stress the need to recover basic social rights

and services, such as access to healthcare and education; access to water and energy (and to fight against “energy poverty”); a total halt to evictions; food subsidies for schools; programs for the creation of sustainable jobs; proposals for an audit and restructuring of cities’ public debt; reopening the access of migrants to the city registry and healthcare. In some cases, such measures are accompanied by a partial or full re-municipalization of services, in particular water and energy companies, funeral services, and cultural resources. In this sense, municipalist programs seek to recover certain aspects of the welfare state by reinforcing the public sphere, which has come under massive attack due to neoliberal privatizations, which are both ubiquitous and acute since the economic boom of the 1990s and 2000s in Spain. This also includes a decided support for the social economy by providing public advisory and financial resources for the foundation of new social and cooperative initiatives.

The second important characteristic of the municipalist programs is that, far from proposing a naive wish list or an abstract pack of empty promises, each program includes detailed plans of action that define goals, lines of intervention, and concrete steps and practices towards accomplishment. This aspect stressed the feasibility and practicality of the program, and also speaks to the depth of technical and professional knowledge involved.

The method for elaborating the program’s content also followed similar lines across all confluences. The definition of thematic areas and working groups usually took place in open assemblies, which were attended mostly by activists, in meetings with civil society organizations and technical experts, or in public meetings in specific neighborhoods. In Madrid, for example, four main thematic lines were defined first: City and Urban Ecology, Economy and Debt, Social Rights, and Open Government. These thematic focal areas were

⁹ An English translation of the Guanyem Barcelona code of ethics can be found at guanyembarcelona.cat.

then discussed further in several “transversal forums” intended to uncover possible connections and overlaps between themes. The discussions resulted in open formulations for programmatic proposals,¹⁰ which were further defined and developed in order to underline their feasibility, incorporating specific plans of action for each one.

The final draft proposals were then thoroughly discussed both in open neighborhood assemblies and via online platforms, which followed a characteristically cooperative open-source logic.¹¹ Here, any citizen could propose further measures and ideas as well as vote among a list of top proposals in order to rank them according to priority. Programs were usually divided into sections, which were listed according to the urgency and specificity of the proposals, beginning with the most urgent and general proposals and ending with the most concrete and detailed ones.

Another important shared methodological dimension of the municipalist projects is the attention devoted to the transformation of administrative structures, citizen participation, and openness and transparency in city government through expansion of participatory budgeting programs and public accountability meetings with elected officials. There were also proposals for decentralizing a city’s administrative structures as well as strengthening decision-making power of neighborhoods and districts by instituting local councils or similar organs. In line with these administrative shifts are experimentations with public-commons forms of use. Going beyond the logic of the usual public-private partnerships, this is a move towards shared ownership and management of public spaces and resources, for example by ceding public buildings to occupied social centers and collectives or transferring the management of civic centers to neighborhood and community organizations, among other measures.

Overflow and Electoral Success

Following a participatory, transparent approach, the election of candidates for the confluences took place in open primaries. The candidates typically reflected the internal diversity of the confluences, and many provided an independent appeal, thus breaking with traditional electoral frameworks. In Madrid, for example, Manuela Carmena, a 71-year old progressive judge and former member of the Supreme Court with a long experience in labor rights and longtime ties to the Socialist Party milieu, offered a kind of respectability that reached many voters, who might otherwise have been reluctant to vote

for “alternative” or “radical” candidates, which were usually identified with Podemos. Ironically, among the different currents within Ahora Madrid, Podemos was probably the strongest proponent of Carmena. Her candidacy was considered part of an electoral strategy—later proven successful—which was conducive to weakening traditional Socialist Party voting blocs. Pedro Santistevé, in Zaragoza, and Xulio Ferreiro, in A Coruña, were mostly unknown to the average voter of the city, but both also had long trajectories as lawyers defending social and civil rights.

Having consciously avoided bank loans, municipalist electoral campaigns were very humble in means. Ahora Madrid’s campaign, for example, had a budget of 150,000 euros, which had been collected mainly through crowd-funding tools.

¹⁰ A visual map of these thematic areas and sub-areas, as well as more information on the Ganemos Madrid Program Working Group, can be found at ganemosmadrid.info.

¹¹ The online platform was initially created by Zaragoza en Común and later adopted by other confluences.

Since the confluences were new political organizations without big staff resources, the bulk of the campaign work was done by volunteers. This turned out not to be an obstacle, however, but an opportunity for conveying a political message that was coherent with the proposals of the Municipalist Confluences. Campaign cars were substituted for small bicycle carts, paper waste for leaflets and posters was severely limited, and asking for citizens' active participation thus became only logical. In line with this approach, many campaign events consisted of assembly-style meetings in outdoor neighborhood squares where candidates' speeches were followed by long open discussions. In this way, citizens became active participants instead of simply passive receivers of campaign messages.

Against the backdrop of this organizational approach, an interesting phenomenon termed *desborde* (overflow) began to emerge in Spanish politics in 2011. The term refers to people organizing

themselves in spontaneous initiatives. Indeed, a defining characteristic of the mobilizations since the 15M movement has been their ability to transcend the usual channels and spaces utilized by established social and political interlocutors (parties, unions, etc.). The actions of the 15M—the occupations of public spaces and, later, the protests of the PAH and the *mareas* (tides) in defense of public education and healthcare rights—were based in forms of self-organization and carried by anonymous yet personal contributions.

Desborde then describes a collective, happily unpredictable logic that is exemplified in a variety of practices—from the making of personal signs and banners to the self-summoning of masses to stop an eviction; or from organizing a “sleep-in” at a school to a spontaneous protest at a hospital. The logic of the overflow does not only apply to informal mobilizations, however, but can also be found in more institutional initiatives. When Podemos was first launched, it



Image 2: Campaign posters of Ada Colau (left, author: unknown) and Manuela Carmena (right, author: @javitxuela) designed by members of MLG Barcelona and MLG Madrid.

was the popular support expressed in the form of thousands of online signatures that finally convinced promoters to run for the European elections. Immediately, circles of sympathizers sprang up all over the country.

Unlike Podemos, however, the municipalist campaigns explicitly sought this *desborde* by asking citizens to get involved in one way or another. “You are our best campaign,” stated one Ahora Madrid initiative, encouraging popular support in the form of sharing social media posts, talking and discussing the campaign with family and friends, or hanging posters from balconies and in apartment windows.

In addition, many people begun to self-organize spontaneously. Probably the most original and famous initiative was the Movimientos de Liberación Gráfica (Movements for Graphic Liberation), a network of graphic artists, designers, and sketch artists, who extended the visual imagination of the campaigns beyond the official design elements. Most of them used Facebook groups,

Instagram, and Tumblr to discuss ideas as well as to share and distribute images. Started in Barcelona and Madrid, the Movimientos de Liberación Gráfica were soon replicated in other cities. The use of social media alongside multiple informal (often word-of-mouth) and familiar channels (for example, in the workplace), rapidly gave the campaigns a viral character.

This proves not only that it is possible to break through the deliberate opacity of mainstream media, but also gives us a sense of the class composition of many Municipalist Confluences. Having made their first appearance as a political subject in Spain during the 15M movement, the confluences consisted mainly of a young, urban and precarious “cognitariat,” with professional skills linked to the production and dissemination of knowledge, language, visual arts, journalism, etc. While this was, of course, not the only social sector to which the Municipalist Confluences appealed, it certainly played a central role in shaping the movements’ language, ethos, and even aesthetics.

The Feminization of Politics

In addition to spontaneous self-organization, the open-ended dimension of the municipalist campaigns also stems from a set of values and attitudes that broadly aligns with the “feminization of politics,” as authors and confluence participants like Kate Shea Baird and Laura Roth formulate it. While these values are often embodied by the confluences’ candidates, and in particular by the female leadership of Ada Colau and Manuela Carmena, the notion goes far beyond the election of individual female leaders. In other words, the appeal and charisma of candidates like Colau and Carmena does not reside in the fact that they are women, but in their insistence on ideas of dialogue, tolerance, empathy, and capacity for listening. They

present a type of leadership that is collectively built, far away from the culture too often built by macho political figures, and thus pointing toward the possibility of rethinking not only leadership, per se, but also political representation. The notion of the leader as a representative of voters then gives way to that of a shared symbol. This figure of the leader, which functions like a screen onto which collective values and desires can be projected, can and should be appropriated by voters.¹²

¹² An interesting treatment of the debates around leadership both in Podemos and the Municipalism Confluences can be found was written by Marco Deseriis. “Podemos’ dilemma and why leadership still matters.” Opendemocracy.net. July 13, 2015.

While some leftists consider this form of politics a rejection of antagonism or confrontation, the contrary is true: The feminization of politics does not reject confrontation, but rather stresses the centrality of the political subject to be built—including its capacities, knowledge, and constructive potential. It opens up space for active self-definition rather than reducing the definition of political subjects to a reactive “anti”-framework that has been set out by one’s political enemies.¹³

It is the night of May 24, 2015. The new confluences, with their diverse names, have won in Barcelona, and they have become the second-strongest forces (after the Partido Popular) in Madrid, Zaragoza, Valencia, and A Coruña. The lessons to be drawn are clear: Not only are the confluences going to rule in these cities, but given the usual antipathy of Partido Popular toward alliance politics, the results have also forced the Socialist Party as well as other progressive regional forces to support the nomination of the confluence candidates for mayor. In Madrid and Valencia this meant an end to almost 25 years of the PP’s rule, as well as a break with the two-party system, which had been in place for the past 40 years at the national, regional, and local levels. In other smaller cities, as well as in the areas surrounding major met

ropolitan centers, the confluences emerged as indispensable political actors even without having won or accessed power, challenging the traditional parties to adopt more progressive positions. In deindustrialized, working class, and commuter towns—places like Ciempozuelos, Badalona, Ripollet, and Hospitalet—growing support for existing confluences as well as the emergence of new initiatives hinted at the possibility of a re-composition of former “red belts.”¹⁴

Yet, nobody said it was going to be easy and the Municipalist Confluences have, maybe not surprisingly, encountered many obstacles once they entered the institutions. Two and a half years after the elections, and more than half-way into the confluences’ first term in office, it is possible to make a cursory assessment of municipalism’s achievements and shortcomings. There seems to be a sense of the limitations of local politics, and an awareness for the human costs—the wear and tear—experienced by those who entered the institutions as council members or in advisory roles. While some of these obstacles are due to the internal logic of the institutions—their slow rhythms of decision-making and compliance with procedures—there also exists a general hostility toward the confluences from local media and economic interests.

Debt, Recovery of Social Rights, and Re-municipalization

The main obstacle, however, came in the form of an initiative introduced by the central government. Disguised as an austerity measure, the Law for Rationalization and Sustainability of Local Administrations is specifically aimed at limiting the capacity for action of local governments. This law, otherwise known as the “Montoro

Law” (for the Tax Revenue Minister, Cristobal Montoro, who proposed it), severely curtails the spending capacities of local administrations in hiring new staff, attending to basic social needs, and re-municipalizing programs and services.

¹³ Kate Shea Baird and Laura Roth. “Left Populism and the Feminization of Politics.” *Roar Magazine*, Issue 6. January 13, 2017.

¹⁴ This is just one possibility, while the reality is much more complex, given that in these same commuter towns surrounding Barcelona, the presence of Ciudadanos—a right wing force that has been present in Catalonia for more than 10 years, but whose representation on the national level is new—has proven equally strong in other elections.

Surprisingly, despite these limitations, the cities ruled by Municipalist Confluences have produced spectacular reductions of debt, totaling 2.3 billion euros altogether. Madrid, which is the most prominent case, has been projected to reduce its skyrocketing 5.6 billion-euro debt by almost half by the end of the current term. Similar debt reductions are expected in Barcelona (from 974 to 422 million euros), Zaragoza (from 834 to 450 million euros), Cádiz (from 275 to 134 million euros), and Santiago (from 42 to 7 million euros). These numbers are politically significant in that they debunk the established neoliberal dictum of “efficient management,” which is supposedly possible only under right-wing or centrist governments. Moreover, they open up an important dimension of institutional conflict by indicating that the cities—although handcuffed by budgetary constraints—can serve as a symbolic counter-power to the central government.

Even though the main consequence of the heavy debt reduction has been the impossibility of implementing many proposed programs,¹⁵ such as the planned re-municipalization of public services and infrastructures, the “Cities for Change” initiative has been able to introduce some urgent measures and expand expenses for social rights. First among these is a significant, albeit not total, decrease in eviction rates accompanied by important improvements in social housing. In Barcelona, for

example, more than 4,000 new housing units were created, 500 of them taken, after pressure and negotiation, from the banks’ empty housing pool. Meanwhile, the city of Zaragoza opened a Municipal Housing Office dedicated to relocating people affected by evictions to public housing units. A Coruña and Santiago also started a Municipal Social Income program, which offers subsidies of up to 250 euros per month to families in need. Indeed, the conflict is now clearly out in the open, since these spectacular debt reductions have not avoided central government interference—in what is a clear political move, although disguised as mere technical “supervision”—in the management of Madrid’s city budget, in November 2017.

Of course, these achievements are far from sufficient and have undergone sometimes tense scrutiny, particularly from the PAH. They nonetheless serve to show that a series of initiatives is underway and, at the very least, that important issues concerning social rights have been brought out into the public sphere, where they are debated or in a process of negotiation. In Barcelona, for example, city council plans to open a public energy company in the fall of 2018, and other cities are currently discussing the possibility of public management of sports centers, park, gardens, and services such as garbage collection.¹⁶ As of now, 100% of the energy used in Barcelona, Madrid, Zaragoza, and Cádiz is produced by renewable sources.

Towards a New Urban Model

The environmental dimension is crucial to the activities of many municipalist initiatives. In

Madrid, for example, city hall introduced a bill limiting private traffic on alternate days of the week, later adding another measure to block

15 Fidel Oliván’s “Los ayuntamientos del cambio, a la manera de Caravaggio,” is a very useful and informed overview of the first two years of the municipalist governments, available at *Contexto y Acción*, Número 125, July 15, 2017.

16 Yeray Iborra. “Barcelona fometará el autoconsumo energético bajo el amparo de una comercializadora municipal.” *El Diario*. July 17, 2016.

the entire city center for private traffic. While both measures were eventually welcomed by a majority of citizens, the campaign behind them went beyond merely environmentalist, or “ecologist,” demands. Questioning the neoliberal city model itself, the proposed measures sparked a debate on public health in the city and on the centrality of the car in urban culture and life more generally.

This debate also opened up potential pathways for other, similar demands and developments. Along these lines, tourism and gentrification have emerged as two of the main battlefields. Barcelona, for example, has put a stop to new licenses for touristic businesses and has begun regulating the rental market (mostly dominated by Airbnb). It also came up with a neighborhood plan, which outlines investments in building renovation and infrastructure—including libraries, sports centers, and spaces for community life—that serve to grow the neighborhood’s fabric.¹⁷ If the measures related to tourism were initially received with hostility by many business owners, the debate helped raise awareness of the dramatic impact that tourism has had on a city like Barcelona, where an unquestioned growth model has remained in place since the transformation of the city for the Olympic Games of 1992. Today, Barcelona is considered a municipal start-up incubator devoted specifically to projects in the social economy, which aim to stimulate women-led initiatives, community-based proximity businesses, and cooperatives for social innovation in mobility, cultural activities, and sustainable tourism.¹⁸

Among the initiatives centered on gender politics, one in particular is worth highlight

ing. Under the slogan “Ciudad de los Cuidados” (Caring City), Zaragoza, Madrid, and Barcelona have started ambitious programs focused on expanding the notion of “economies of care” in the city, sparking changes across different levels of action. On the administrative level, this involved the creation of gender policy offices, or councillorships, that function in a transversal way. Not confined to a predetermined area of city government, these “technical offices for gender transversalization” are responsible for elaborating an “Equality Plan,” whose goal is to integrate a gender perspective into all city council policy. This plan implies, for example, that “gender clauses” are included in public contracts with companies, but it also outlines the production of educational materials for primary and secondary schools; support for the creation of domestic worker networks; workshops for local police and other municipal services and bodies; and collaboration with neighborhood and parents school associations.¹⁹

Although limited, these kinds of developments constitute important building blocks for an alternative urban model. Yet, many participants in the municipal governments express the challenge of conveying such a model to the electorate in an effective way. After decades of neoliberal shaping of cities through big investments, spectacular events, and world-class architecture, it is difficult to transmit the message that city governments are doing things for the public—even if they do not cut ribbons on new buildings or are avoiding urban projects (such as malls, sports stadiums, convention centers, etc.) that appeal to a traditional developmentalist imaginary of government action.

¹⁷ Barcelona pone en marcha un plan para el vecindario y contra gentrificación.” *El Periódico – Barcelona*. March 3, 2017.

¹⁸ Barcelona Activa’s mission and lines of action can be found at barcelonactiva.cat.

¹⁹ Interview with Arantza Gracia, council member of Zaragoza and delegate council member for Education and Inclusion, August 2016.

A Democratic City: Participation and Governance

More visible advances have been made in the areas of administrative decentralization and democratic participation. In terms of administrative changes, new organs like the *foros locales* (local forums) that were established in Madrid are worth mentioning. Operating at the city district level, the existence of local forums alters the established communication between different districts and the city as a whole, which had traditionally been mediated by the political parties present at the district level, which could each send up to six proposals to the general city plenary. The local forums, which comprise working groups and citizens commissions, can formulate three proposals each.

Concerning the push toward participatory democracy, one particularly well known initiative, which was established in Madrid as well, is the creation of a participatory budgeting mechanism. Using a web portal (decide.madrid.es), citizens can vote on and prioritize existing budget proposals, including how to spend pre-allocated funds. In addition, they can submit new proposals that are regularly voted on and, when selected, are provided with public counseling and incorporated into the city's budget. While

participatory budgeting is, of course, not free of contradictions and misuses, the initiative has significantly increased the power of participatory mechanisms and processes.²⁰ In particular, it has assigned a binding character to decisions that had been voted on; it has led to a larger budget allocation; and it has enabled the direct channeling of voted decisions to Council Strategic Plans.

Not only Madrid, but other "Cities for Change" have also demonstrated great potential when it comes to innovations in participatory technologies and data use. Under the notion of "smart cities," metropolitan areas like Barcelona, for example, have turned away from the neoliberal understanding of the city as a grid of data flows to be extracted by private entrepreneurship and apps. Instead, they understand technology as an ecosystem of networks and data that public institutions can use to localize needs, improve services, and support cooperative projects for self-management and citizen initiatives. The underlying principles of this technological ecosystem are openness, democratic participation, and public ownership of data. Both Madrid and Barcelona have adopted the use of open data and open source software for all of their operations.²¹

"Culture Wars"

While it is easy to dismiss some of these achievements in decentralization and participation as merely symbolic, it is undeniable that they have had a deeper cultural impact: They foster changes in language, attitudes, and ways of approaching social problems. The assemblies and events held by the confluences are usually well attended and the discussions they spark draw the interest of a great number of citizens. As such, they lay groundwork for the formulation of a new polit-

ical imagination, whose tangible effects on people's life can only be proven by a subsequent electoral victory in 2019.

However, it is precisely on the cultural front that hostilities have been more open, such that

20 Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Ernesto Ganuza. 2017. *Popular Democracy. The Paradox of Participation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

21 Paul Mason. 2015. "We can't allow tech giants to rule smart cities." *The Guardian*, 25 October 2015.

many observers describe the political and social changes in Spain today as “culture wars” (borrowing the term from the race, gender, and class debates of the US in the 1980s and 1990s). Just as in the US, it is Spanish right-wing political figures and media outlets that use the trope of the “culture wars” to frame the public debate.²² Although anecdotal and vastly unfounded, the use of this trope has at times been able to inflict serious damage on the confluences. At the very least, its polemic use has contributed to a hostile climate surrounding the confluences’ work in city councils across Spain and especially in Madrid, where the financial interests behind urban development plans soon perceived the confluence as a threat.

Indeed, having been the ruling party in Madrid for more than twenty years, the PP has fine-tuned a powerful machine that relies on media outlets, the police, the judiciary, and *ad hoc* civil society organizations. However unfounded the polemic of the “culture war” rhetoric may be, it has nurtured a hostile climate that has, for

example, led to the judicial prosecution of city council members for statements published on Twitter and to the arrest of two puppet artists for performing a satirical play in a public space sponsored by the city council.²³

Far from being exceptional cases, the “culture war” is now not only a part of the everyday political hustle but also reaches deep into the sphere of historical memory. In Madrid, for example, where the city council has formed a municipal commission on historical memory, the cultural battle focuses on the renaming of streets in accordance with the Law for Historical Memory, which had been approved more than ten years earlier under the Socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero but has never been put into action by Madrid’s conservative movements. This is why in Catalonia these “culture wars” are sometimes framed as conflicts between those political groups wishing to highlight the anti-Francoist struggles of Spain’s past rather than a broader Catalan cultural movement.

International and National Networks

If the political landscape within Spain has frequently looked hostile to the confluences, the international plane has been more welcoming and interested in the municipalist experience. Barcelona en Comú in particular has established an active international presence, for example, by putting forward an initiative towards a network of “Refuge Cities” in response to the refugee crisis in the wake of the Syria conflict. The initiative was not only supported by other cities within Spain, such as Madrid, Zaragoza, Cádiz, A Coruña, and Santiago de Compostela,

but also joined by several European cities, among them Paris, Milan, Lesbos, and Lampedusa, which advocate alternatives to the deadlock in EU migration policies. Other examples of the international presence of Barcelona en Comú include the group’s organization of the international Municipalist Summit Fearless Cities in Barcelona in June 2017, as well as Ada Colau’s intervention at the UN Habitat III Summit in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016.

²² *Spanish Neocon* by Carmona, García and Sánchez provides a history of the adaptation of the cultural language wars to the Spanish context by the Popular Party and several conservative media outlets.

²³ Known as the “case of the puppeteers,” the artists’ imprisonment in February 2016 sparked an international campaign in defense of civil rights in Spain, drawing international support from public figures such as Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali, Silvia Federici, and Toni Negri, among many others.

In addition to growing international networks, the Municipalist Confluences also maintain their own channels of communication, mutual support, and collaboration on the national level. Through regular meetings and public conferences, like Municilab (Barcelona, October 2017) or the MAC meetings, they seek to counteract both their institutional isolation within the national and regional administrations in Spain and the pressure exerted by media and economic powers. In this sense, maintaining national networks is in some ways more complicated than growing an international presence due to internal differences within the confluences. In particular, we can observe a clear divide between those confluences which directly engage

with and work inside the institutions, and those which remain outside of them.

A more fluid, consistent, and self-conscious mode of communication among the confluences—but also between the confluences and the broader social movements that remain at their base—is therefore a crucial task for the development of a shared political strategy for the future. In more concrete terms, it would be desirable to establish and consolidate formal spaces of communication between those working on the inside and those who remain outside—that is, spaces in which contradictions, expectations, and disappointments could be channeled productively through honest, fraternal debate.

The Shape of a Left to Come?

A year and a half before the next local elections, what future awaits the Municipalist Confluences, and what are the long-term consequences of their work? Given the novelty and complex internal structure of the confluences, it is difficult to assess how they will approach the 2019 elections—which organizational changes, if any, they may undertake, and which candidates they will nominate. There is, among both participants and supporters of the confluences, a strong sense of exhaustion. Two and a half years of constant attacks by other parties, economic forces, and mainstream media have led to a feeling of isolation that can obscure the successes and highlight the failures of the confluences' political work. In fact, however, an assessment of their accomplishments shows reasonably good results given that the confluences have—despite the aforementioned difficulties, contradictions, and limitations—managed to fulfill significant parts of their electoral programs and promises.

Of course, this positive summary pertains mainly to the confluences' short-term initiatives. The realization of other, more long-term transformations, such as the restructuring of the entire city model, will need more time. Re-election is thus crucial to the sustainability of many initiatives, but there are several challenges related to conveying to the broader citizenry about the need to support and vote for these confluences in 2019.

The main obstacle is probably the perceived lack of a tangible narrative that would allow the confluences to integrate their past achievements, present diagnoses, and future projects into a compelling account. While the elements for such a narrative undoubtedly exist, they lack a format and framework that is immediately accessible to the broader public. The issue, of course, is how to sustain this arduous ideological struggle against decades of management by the neoliberal hegemony of political expectations, ideas, and the collective imagination.

“Democracy begins where you live” has been the motto used by the Municipalist Confluences to convey the importance of local administration as well as direct, everyday experience in the expansion and transformation of institutions towards a more democratic and just society. Notwithstanding the truth of this powerful message, the various levels of political mediation never function separately. This is especially true for the symbolic plane, considering that the cities we live in belong to a state and are always connected to other local, regional, and national entities. It also applies to the concrete plane of policymaking, where the policies stemming from other administrative levels, as well as the economic and social forces of globalization, have real impact on the life of cities and their residents. This is why political struggles at the local level always need to establish connections and alliances at other levels.

There has been a discussion for some time now in Spain around the possibility to articulate what Gramsci called a “historical bloc.” This bloc would form around Podemos, the Municipalist Confluences, and other national as well as regional left and progressive forces. If there were moments when Podemos and the Municipalist Confluences seemed to have been competing for the same political space, there is now a better shared understanding of the need for cooperation. One issue, however, is whether this bloc would consist of a mere pragmatic coalition at the electoral plane, or whether it could actually honor the Gramscian idea of the historical bloc by becoming a strong social and cultural force. Despite all their differences, Podemos and the confluences—both heirs of the 15M movement—appeal to roughly the same political universe. A bloc involving both Podemos and the Municipalist Confluences as well as other forces should therefore look more like an ecosystem. This is to say that the different political groups within a large, diverse bloc would maintain their respective domains of action while also functioning collectively as counter-powers. As such, the bloc would be able to operate as a political

interface of the broader formation for change that emerged in 2011.

Let us not forget that beyond the urgent demands against austerity measures, many of the aspirations and hopes of the 15M movement were oriented towards a “real democracy.” In the Spanish case, this meant a profound questioning of the political, economic, social, and cultural consensus that had structured the Spanish monarchic parliamentary regime since the transition period of the 1970s. Recent events like the crisis in Catalonia show both the consolidation of a new political space and the urgent need for a convergence of political counter-forces capable of articulating an alternative vision for the entire country. For this to happen, a cooperation between municipalist approaches (such as those of Barcelona en Comú) and populist ones like Podemos, with its insistence on the pluri-national character of Spain, will prove crucial. The possibility for such cooperation is very real given that both populist and municipalist initiatives share a number of characteristics, including their reliance on experimental and open-ended strategies.

The emergence of new political forces and spaces in Spain cannot be explained solely as product of political voluntarism or the audacity of certain political figures and groups. Their existence rather points to a renewal of past political traditions, which are now being reconfigured using new languages. In this sense, left neo-populism and municipalism can be seen as provisional answers to a situation marked by the everlasting effects of an economic crisis that is still ongoing—first and foremost the degradation of democratic structures, but also changes in the country’s social composition, including the emergence of new political subjectivities such as a “precariat.” As in other places, these transformations affect especially younger people, visible for example in the notable generational gap in electoral results. This gap also suggests that left neo-populism and municipalism are far from yet being coherent political projects.

Power in Experimentation

Left neo-populism and municipalism are far from yet being coherent political projects. Ultimately, however, this is not a weakness but a profound strength. In a way, both municipalism and populism can be understood as transitional, experimental forms and languages. As such, they carry the marks of the social, political, and ideological context from which they emerged. In other words, while these new movements are oriented towards a post-neoliberal world order, the prefix “post-” in “post-neoliberal” refers not so much to an overcoming of neoliberalism as it signifies the dependency of these movements on a previous system that still has ideological and political weight.

If neoliberalism is an unavoidable historical fact, what political vision can be formulated outside of the historical conditions of its emergence? Municipalism points to the possibility of turning existing ideological elements, such as the commons, governance, or citizenship, into building blocks for a new political articulation—one that is capable of using prevailing elements to shape new relations, implications, and meanings.²⁴ More specifically, municipalism’s potential as a new political strategy lies in the growing role of cities and metropolitan areas as economic and political actors on a global scale. To name just a few battles to be fought in the years to come, municipalism will open up important fields of action when it comes to the flow of global capital into and out of cities; the ecological consequences of overpopulation; and the growing social, economic, and ideological divide between urban, suburban, and rural areas (as seen, for example, in the last US election).

²⁴ The work of radical scholars such as Paolo Gerbaudo, who speaks of a “new citizenism” that would characterize the movements of the squares and most of their institutional-political outcomes, offers very useful discussions in this respect.

Take the notion of “the commons.” Social movements as well as the Municipalist Confluences in Spain have used the commons (and other related terms) to varying degrees of concretion and complexity. The conceptual flexibility and diversity of understandings of the term offers the hegemonic potential of serving as a cornerstone for a political project that, on the one hand, rejects neoliberal privatization, and, on the other, refuses to fall back into the kind of monolithic understandings of the public/the state that has characterized many left traditions. Indeed, the fact that pro-capitalist initiatives are increasingly exploring forms of cooperation and rehearsing a discourse of “common goods” should force the left not to abandon or dismiss those concepts, but to actually engage in an ideological struggle regarding their definition.

From this point of view, what is at stake is not the creation of self-sustained communities that form around “pure” commons, but the opening of a political struggle oriented towards a “commoning” of the public sphere. This implies that public institutions—their functioning, structures, and uses—would be rethought according to their relation to common interests and the reproduction of society, thus turning institutions into infrastructures for the common good. In an urban context, this means, for example, a conscious fostering of social and solidarity economy; the transfer of land, buildings, and spaces to community organizations; processes of co-management of services; or the much needed re-municipalization of crucial services and sectors. Otherwise put, it means a transfer of power from state to society and, more importantly, the production of social counter-forces. The commons, in other words, is not so much a pre-defined entity as it is a way of doing things—a form of social action.

In a similar vein, neoliberal capitalism has developed a concept of governance as *ad hoc* arrangements between states and global corporations, as well as between different levels of administrations across national borders. The related goal, at worst, is to push forward an agenda based on the primacy of the private sector or, at best, of an abstract “civil society” that mirrors the private sector. Despite neoliberal dominance, real experimentation in forms of governance, increasing social complexity, emergence of new political subjectivities, the intersectionality of struggles, and the improved capacities for participation provided by technological tools point to the possibility of imagining new forms of distributed democracy or even of “governance from below.” The demand for “real democracy” was, after all, a constant across the movements of 2011. Indeed, if big corporations develop tools for participation (as has been the case with the recent “political turn” in Silicon Valley) or even political intervention (as demonstrated by Mark Zuckerberg), leftists and progressives should think not only about how to counteract these advances, but also work on proposing concrete alternatives.

One last important ideological element that the Municipalist Confluences can and should reappropriate is the conception of “citizens” or “the citizenry.” Rather than defining “the citizen” as an enclosed legal status—in the sense of a naive, empty, or abstract “citizenism”—municipalism’s reference to the citizenry al-

ludes to an active political subject in formation. This is an expanded and dynamic notion of citizenship, which is able to encompass any inhabitant of the city regardless of origin and legal status. Even if citizens are interpellated as individuals—after all, any future political project needs to start from the broadly shared, neoliberal universe of social relations that is based on the individual—they are called upon to participate in a political process that involves displacing that individualized standpoint. While the historical uses and implications of the notion of the “individual” or the “citizen” are certainly not innocent, future political projects should focus on how to retain the concept’s political potential as a radical democratic aggregation tool rather than dismissing it altogether.

Of course, these potential lines of action for the Municipalist Confluences are not enough, and following them does not guarantee future successes. This is why I have not presented them as solutions or recipes, but rather as potential battlegrounds or areas of ongoing intervention. The outcome of this struggle will be determined by many other factors, but in the meantime these and other issues can help us to see what looms below the desert of bleak prospects that we currently face. If this political landscape seems to suggest that we must remain in a reactive and defensive position, I would like us to take a closer look and recognize the hidden possibilities for transformation that we currently have at hand.

Acknowledgements: To Ana Méndez and Guillermo Zapata (Ahora Madrid), Laura Roth (Barcelona en Comú), and Pau Faus for sharing their thoughts, experiences, work, and insights with me. To Nociones Comunes Zaragoza (Guillermo Valenzuela, Pato Pérez, Elena Pilcher, and Raúl Royo Fraguas), Beatriz García, and David Gámez (Traficantes de Sueños) for so many past, future, and ongoing conversations. To Pablo La Parra for so many shared discussions. To my friends and comrades from Common Notions/Nociones Comunes NYC (Pablo Benson, Marisa Anne Day, Malav Kanuga, and Susana Draper) for thinking about how political hypotheses (municipalist and otherwise) can be made possible, also on this side of the Atlantic.