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Spanish State

Why the municipal movement must be internationalist

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The municipalist movements of the Spanish state can't ignore the global crisis of neoliberalism. It's up to us to stand up and defend our idea of bottom up, feminist and radically democratic change.

The 'municipal assault' that's been launched in many cities in the Spanish state over the past two years has been dizzying. Neighbourhood assemblies. Electoral programmes. Codes of ethics. Party negotiations. Crowdfunding. Electoral campaigns. Coalition deals. Offices. The streets. Administration. Achievements. Contradictions. Mistakes. Lessons learned. It would be easy to get absorbed in the daily victories and defeats if it weren't for the turbulent global context in which we live. The Umbrella Revolution. Oxi. Refugees. Nuit Debout. Brexit. Dilma Rousseff. The peace deal in Colombia. Trump. Le Pen. As urgent as the everyday tasks in our neighbourhoods may be, the municipal movement has the responsibility to reflect on our role beyond our cities and the borders of the state.

Just over a year ago, Barcelona en Comú began to explore this question. First, in reaction to the enormous interest generated by our election victory across Europe and the rest of the world. From occupied social centres in Naples and Rome to think tanks in London and Berlin, we quickly realized that our experience had become a model of political transformation. The figure of Ada Colau, with her activist background, combined with the deeply collective process of Barcelona en Comú, and the international profile of the city of Barcelona, have captured the attention of many people who are searching for new responses to the economic and political crisis. In addition to these factors, many of the struggles of the city hall and social movements in Barcelona are also taking place in other cities. For example, controlling mass tourism, guaranteeing the right to housing, and remunicipalizing basic services. The municipalist movement that emerged in 2014 represents, for many people, the possibility of a real alternative.

While we've been contacted by many organizations, it's the exchanges we've had with other municipalist movements, whether they're in government or not, which have been the most productive and inspiring. As well as sharing our goals, these movements share our ways of working. They put concrete goals above partisan interests; they focus on doing rather than sterile, theoretical debates; they communicate with everyday, emotional language; they are feminists and are working to feminize politics by prioritizing everyday practices and care work; and they build from the bottom up, using collective intelligence. In short, the activists in municipalist movements are both radical and pragmatic; they're people with whom we want to imagine and build the future.

In this regard, in Barcelona we're mapping municipalist experiences around the world and working with them to think about how to work together and support one another. Thanks to this process, we've developed a hypothesis that seeks to put the international context in the centre of municipal debates and municipalism in the centre of global debates. And we've reached the conclusion that the way forward is to work as part of a global municipalist network.

Why a global municipalist network?

To explain this idea, it's important to underline that by 'network' we mean a way of working, rather than a formal structure. And we are not referring to an institutional network of cities. Rather, we mean a political space made up of movements and organizations that may be in government, opposition or not participate in electoral politics at all. Obviously, our city halls should work with its counterparts in other cities to achieve shared goals. The agreement between Barcelona and Paris to collaborate on the issues of tourism, public water management and historical memory is a good example of this, as are the networks of refuge cities or of local governments who oppose the TTIP. But there are still very few city halls outside of the Spanish state that are governed by political parties that share our

goals and ways of working. We must create a political space so that we can work with others to challenge, with greater strength and from more areas, the democratic deficit imposed by states and markets.

If there was any doubt, the first year and a half of government of the ‘Cities of Change’ in Spain has shown that the capacity for local government intervention is strongly determined by global forces and trends. We see how the rents in our city rise exorbitantly as a direct consequence of companies like Airbnb that speculate with housing, ignoring local regulations. We get ready to welcome refugees who never arrive. We try to promote the social and solidarity economies in a context of insatiable global capitalism. Given that we face adversaries who cross borders, our response must also be transnational. We must be aware that our ability to restrain the excesses of gigantic multinationals like Airbnb in Barcelona will depend on the success of struggles for the right to housing in San Francisco, Amsterdam, New York and Berlin.

At the same time, the collapse of social democratic parties and the inability of the traditional left to reinvent itself are opening up a political vacuum in Europe. If bottom up, feminist and radically democratic movements like our own don’t step up to the plate to occupy and organize this space, others will do so. The macho, intellectual left will try to appropriate the symbolic capital of bottom up processes without adopting the practices that define us. Or, what’s even worse and more likely, it will be the authoritarian far right that will capitalize on this opportunity, using its discriminatory and racist conceptions of sovereignty and ‘the people’. Yet, at the risk of being provocative, the slogan ‘Take Back Control’ of the Brexit campaign or the ‘Forgotten Man’ of Trump are not concepts so far removed from the ‘Real Democracy’ of the indignados or the ‘99%’ of Occupy: all speak to the desire for a break with the political Establishment and an unfair economic system. The fact is that framing these desires using the nation-state makes it easier for racist and xenophobic ideas to become attached to them. Whereas locating sovereignties at local level makes this association more difficult and opens up other possibilities. Cities are diverse, places of meeting and cultural exchange; and if political and economic alternatives are constructed at local level, based on neighbourhood, rather than ethnic, identities, through face-to-face interaction, we can create a space of trust in which our rights don’t depend on our origins.

Ideas for global municipalist action

Once we set ourselves this challenge, the question becomes: what to do? We’ve identified four areas of action. The first is related to strengthening the idea of municipalism through communication and training. In order to internationalize our movement, we have to communicate with the rest of the world, explaining our values and practices and the policies that are being implemented by our city hall. This means producing materials in different languages for an international public, as we do through our weekly Facebook posts [#InternationalSundays](#) -, our international Twitter account [@BComuGlobal](#) and our municipalist guide. But we also have to introduce the international context within our organizations through debates and workshops that involve our neighbourhood assemblies, committees and policy groups in global debates.

The second area of action is that of strengthening the network itself. The more we are and the greater the capacities of each node of the network, the stronger we will be. So, we must continue to find movements similar to our own, get to know them, and build trust. The citizen municipal platforms in the Spanish state, with our organizational and institutional experience, can be especially useful in this process: our lessons learned (both our good moves and our mistakes) can help others who are considering setting off on the same path.

The third area of action is policy-based. As municipalist movements we share priorities in areas relating to local democracy and urban life, such as the right to housing, the use of public space, the management of the commons. We can harness our knowledge by learning from one another, reflecting together and develop shared strategies on these issues.

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Finally, perhaps the most important action for a political network is that of providing political support, both to celebrate our achievements and express solidarity in difficult times. In this regard, Barcelona en Comú has already given support to the struggle against urban speculation in Belgrade, to detained Kurdish mayors and to the No campaign in the Italian referendum; in all three cases at the request of our municipal contacts on the ground.

It is true that we already have a lot of battles to fight, and that adding the international dimension requires an important investment of time and energy. But there is a lifeline: internationalism is a powerful motivator. Today, over 70 activists participate in the International Committee of Barcelona en Comú, many of whom have signed up in the last few months. There is no doubt that our activists are dyed-in-the-wool internationalists; they know that we can't shy away from the responsibility we took on when we stood for election. For good or for ill, we're the focus of international attention. In the face of those who have an interest in the failure of our project, there are many more who want, and need, us to show that a democratic alternative is possible. Our example can and must serve to motivate other municipalist movements to take the step to build, from the bottom up, an unstoppable global revolution.

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