



What's so new about New Municipalism?

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Abstract

New municipalism is a nascent global social movement aiming to democratically transform the local state and economy – but what, precisely, is so new about it? I situate new municipalism in its geographical, political-economic and historical contexts, by comparison with earlier waves of municipal socialism and international municipalism, arguing that it re-politicises traditions of transnationalism, based not on post-political policy mobilities but on urban solidarities in contesting neoliberal austerity urbanism and platform capitalism. This article identifies three new municipalisms – platform, autonomist, managed – whose characteristics, contradictions, interconnections and potentials are explored in terms of state-space restructuring, urban-capitalist crisis and cycles of contention.

Keywords

community wealth building, local state transformation, municipal governance, platform capitalism, right to the city, urban policy mobility, urban social movements

1 Introduction

Municipalism – the democratic autonomy of municipalities (from town parishes to metropolitan boroughs to city-regions) over political and economic life vis-à-vis the nation-state – is renascent. The municipal state is being re-interpreted as ‘the vanguard agent of global governance’ following an earlier urban-entrepreneurial period of being more passively ‘under siege by the neoliberal economy’ (Laurmann, 2018: 208). Political devolution from nation-states to municipalities is unfolding globally, for instance England’s ‘devolution revolution’ (Ayres et al., 2018), whilst municipal governments, under democratic pressures and neoliberal austerity, experiment with new forms of co-production, shifting from regulatory to enabling roles, as a ‘partner state’ (Bauwens and Onzia, 2017), evident in a growing

number of ‘cooperative cities’ in the USA catalysing and cultivating worker-owned co-op ecosystems (Sutton, 2019). Concurrently, urban activists are experimenting with spatial practices that (re)claim the right to the city (Iveson, 2013), prefigure post-capitalist urban commons (Chatterton and Pusey, 2019) and self-organise as ‘rebel cities’ (Harvey, 2012; Kolioulis and Süß, 2018).

Building on these trends, in 2017 Barcelona hosted the first international gathering of the Fearless Cities network – the ‘coming out party’ for a so-called ‘new municipalism’ (Russell, 2019: 2) – drawing together around 700

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participants and 100 citizen platforms from 180 cities and 40 countries, aiming to democratically transform cities to resist growing inequalities, democratic deficits and social injustices (Barcelona en Comú et al., 2019). Despite internal variegation, new municipalists are united by two distinct features: first, harnessing the urban or municipal scale to achieve strategic ends which – secondly – vary from ‘pragmatic’ (Aldag et al., 2019) and ‘entrepreneurial’ (Thompson et al., 2020) municipalisms, representing more constrained, reactive responses to neoliberal austerity urbanism, to more proactive, contentious, expansive programmes for transformation of state/capitalist social relations, inspired by Bookchin’s (2014) anarcho-eco-socialist vision for ‘libertarian municipalism’ (Carson, 2017).

This article provides an original conceptualisation of this diverse terrain through a critical-urban-theoretical lens, focusing on the vanguard city of Barcelona and those more transformative initiatives that strategically aim for – as the slogan of Cooperation Jackson, a leading light in the global movement, puts it – the ‘democratization of society and the socialization of production’ (Akuno and AkuNangwaya, 2017). Such a radical political agenda appears to distinguish new municipalism from more established counterparts and the wider historical field, including varieties of municipal socialism (Leopold and McDonald, 2012) and an ascendant ‘international municipalism’ dominated by European and transatlantic municipal connections reaching back to utopian-socialist movements in the early 19th century (Saunier, 2002), becoming formally organised in the early 20th century (Dogliani, 2002) and expanding fast today through proliferating inter-urban networks and international associations, such as Eurocities and United Cities and Local Governments (Acuto et al., 2017; Ewen and Hebbert, 2007), to form a post-political technocratic infrastructure for global urban policy mobility, imitation and innovation (Clarke, 2012b).

Fearless Cities represents a *counter-hegemonic* variation on this theme. But how so? What exactly is so *new* about this latest, more radical wave of experimentation in municipalism, when situated within the wider landscape?

Taking my cue from histories of international municipalism and ‘municipal connections’ (Clarke, 2012a, 2012b; Dogliani, 2002; Saunier, 2001, 2002), this article sets out to explore what separates – and *connects* – new and other municipalisms, historically and geographically. In stark contrast to the ‘apolitical’ (Saunier, 2002) and ‘anti-political’ (Clarke, 2012b) rendering of prevailing international municipalism, past and present, the novelty of new municipalism resides in a newly-politicised and radical-reformist orientation towards the (local) state, in imagining new institutional formations that embody *urban* rather than state logics – be that through challenging traditional party politics with digitally-mediated citizen platforms; channelling economic development through non-state urban networks of anchor institutions and co-ops; or building autonomous federations of urban assemblies in place of the state. These represent three new municipalist trajectories to be unpacked in this article.

I bring this important-yet-overlooked literature into conversation with more familiar work on ‘the urban’ (Barnett, 2014; Beveridge and Koch, 2019a, 2019b; Magnusson, 2014) by way of a shared concern over the state-centrism of so much social science, including geography and urban studies. We have been ‘seeing like a state’ (rather than a city) for so long that we conflate the polis with the state and fail to see the ‘symbiosis of the urban and the political’ (Magnusson, 2014) implying an urban *polis* tied to the global *cosmopolis* transcending nation-state mediation. Karatani (2014) shows how different modes of production – tribal, Asiatic, feudal, capitalist, post-capitalist – are entwined with different prevailing social formations, from gift-based clans through agrarian empires to nation-states and municipalism; that the

hegemonic nation-state-regulated-capitalist-world-market is an historically recent development, amenable to change. Those seeking or conceptualising alternative polities are caught within state-centric coordinates, working ‘in, against and beyond the state’ (Cumbers, 2015), ‘reimagining the state’ (Cooper et al., 2019) or ‘prefiguring the state’ (Cooper, 2017). New municipalists are pushing up against these boundaries to either re-form the state at the municipal scale or prefigure a different kind of polis, rooted in the urban. In breaking down and reconfiguring the connections between the political, the state, and the ‘urban everyday’ (Beveridge and Koch, 2019a), new municipalism begins to subvert state-centrism, to ‘see like a city’ (Magnusson, 2014).

Although new municipalism can be read alongside a number of progressive urbanisms working ‘in, against and beyond’ neoliberalism (Featherstone, 2015) to contest austerity and capitalist exploitation of human and non-human natures and, potentially, to prefigure post-capitalist, eco-socialist futures (Chatterton and Pusey, 2019), it remains a particularly promising prospect for its conscious insertion into, and potential transformation of, the spatialities through which state regulation and capital flows are territorialised. In re-imagining and re-territorialising state spaces, new municipalist experiments prefigure ‘alternative regionalisms’ (Jonas, 2013) that may challenge (state-regulated) capitalism and incubate alternative economic spaces, or ‘alterity’ (Fuller et al., 2010). They offer us an unparalleled empirical arena to ‘generate concrete abstractions about the social and territorial structures through which alternatives are performed’ – a vital endeavour scholars of alterity often stop short of (Jonas, 2013: 826).

In the following part of this article I answer the question: *what’s so new about new municipalism?* First, I situate new municipalism within historical traditions of municipal socialism and international municipalism, focusing on how

municipal connections are now being forged differently on the basis of solidarity rather than inter-urban ‘comparison’ (Saunier, 2002). Second, I elaborate political and economic novelties through the example of Barcelona as the exemplary, leading ‘fearless city’. Third, I contextualise the rupture with previous modes of municipalism through the lens of urban crisis, arguing that what distinguishes new municipalism is its specific, radical-democratic and transformative response to urban-capitalist crises. This sets out the historical context for understanding the contemporary landscape, from which I outline a tripartite typology for conceptualising new municipalist varieties – platform, autonomist, managed – through several indicative case studies across the Global North (with which I am most familiar), bringing Barcelona into comparison with Rojava (Syria) and Jackson (Mississippi) and with Preston (England) and Cleveland (Ohio). Finally, I tease out the contradictions and challenges facing the movement before, in conclusion, outlining future research directions, focusing on the potential of platform municipalism, situated within current critical debates around ‘platform capitalism’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2020; Srnicek, 2016), ‘platform urbanism’ (Leszczynski, 2019; Richardson, 2020) and ‘digital socialism’ (Fuchs, 2020; Morozov, 2019).

II Renewing histories of transnational municipalism

New municipalism builds on a long, rich history reaching back to ancient city-states, when cities and citizenship were co-constituted in the Aristotelian idea of the polis (Bookchin, 1987). Distinctly urban institutions and networks such as guilds and the Hanseatic League were established across medieval Europe before being eclipsed by Westphalian nation-states, bureaucracy and diplomacy, and consequently consigned by Weberian sociology as pre-modern relics (Ewen and Hebbert, 2007). From the early

19th century following the invention of local authorities within European state-regulatory regimes, municipalism re-emerged in France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Belgium and Britain, where many municipalities were won, electorally, by socialist and reformist groups who then experimented with municipal socialism – ideas that soon spread across the Atlantic (Dogliani, 2002).

Although utopian-socialist in conception – when ‘all sides agreed (even anarchists in some cases) that local government should be a laboratory for testing socialist policies’ (Davis, 2018: 82) – international municipalism soon evolved into an apolitical and techno-scientific endeavour in pursuit of the ‘common good’ oriented towards creating and sustaining municipal connections across diverse ideological positionalities and building a ‘communal science’ of shared knowledge for improving and replicating innovative urban policies (Saunier, 2002). It was rooted in the Socialist International and cooperative movements (Davis, 2018), grew with the Garden Cities and Town and Country Planning movements (Saunier, 2001) before, in the wake of two world wars, intertwining with pacifism, internationalism and Esperanto (Clarke, 2012b). Transatlantic connections were driven by informal networks of key social reformers – ‘the Urban Internationale’ (Saunier, 2001) – circulating knowledge via study tours; formalised into associations beginning with the International Union of Local Authorities in 1913, pre-dating the first permanently-organised association among nation-states (Ewen and Hebbert, 2007).

The transnational municipalist movement grew throughout the early 20th century, although many of its innovations in collective economic management and public provision were absorbed into post-war national welfare states. European municipalist ambitions then turned towards post-war reconstruction, peace and unification, through such initiatives as town-twinning, becoming absorbed in EU

policy networks such as Eurocities. From the 1980s, municipalism spread to Eastern Europe and Asia following post-socialist transitions, and to Latin America following democratic overthrow of authoritarian regimes (Clarke, 2012a). Global city networks have multiplied through neoliberal globalisation, with over 200 networks by 2017, over a third created since 2001, increasingly constructed in the policy architecture of international bodies and NGOs such as UN Habitat and the WHO (Acuto et al., 2017) and tied closely to North American philanthropies such as the Rockefeller Foundation (Leitner et al., 2018).

For Saunier (2002), the leading historian of international municipalism, such cooperation entailed – and still entails – members’ ascription to universalist postulates: that the future is undoubtedly urban; that municipalities, not nation-states, are the basic cell structure of civilisations; that municipal governance is an apolitical, technical exercise aspiring to scientific method; that municipalities, existing in a shared universe of rules and values, are globally comparable. Learning, collaboration and policy transfer were, and still are, facilitated by city exhibitions, conferences and congresses; inter-city competitive rivalry as endemic as cooperation. Clarke (2012b) locates the origins of post-politics within contemporary urban policy mobilities in this universalist compulsion towards consensus-seeking avoidance of contentious issues to maintain diverse policy communities but highlights recent acceleration in ‘fast policy’ cycles and narrowing of frames and repertoires as productive of deepening post-politics. This is evident in the proliferation of networks promoting neoliberal ‘grand signifier’ discourses of sustainability, resilience and smart cities – forming a global urban policy ‘complex’ (Leitner et al., 2018).

New municipalism has emerged precisely to contest the neoliberal conditions in which such a complex has flourished, in response to neoliberal austerity emanating in the urban heartlands

of the global financial crisis, notably Spain. From mid-2015, across most major Spanish cities, citizen platforms such as Barcelona en Comú took control of local authorities through ‘dual power’ strategies that successfully mobilised the power of anti-austerity social movements to elect progressive candidates to municipal office. Many of these candidates were drawn from the movements: Ada Colau, elected mayor of Barcelona in 2015, was a founding member of PAH, the anti-eviction housing justice platform contesting foreclosures and financialisation (Blanco et al., 2019; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). These municipalist ‘confluences’ (*confluencias*) rose on the swell of the ‘tides’ (*mareas*) of protests against austerity that swept through urban squares – the 15-M Movement or Indignados – through which an ‘overflow’ (*desbordes*) of social energies and political potentialities were channelled by citizens engaging in new forms of self-organisation (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017), bringing together diverse intersecting citizen interests, classes and groups into platforms that transcend traditional party lines for more open, democratic organisational forms. The shift from ‘occupying squares’ to ‘occupying institutions’ – taking the movements *into* the institutions – was adopted as a novel strategy following exhaustion of traditional routes to claiming rights from the state. Once in power, citizen platforms have pursued – to varying success – progressive leftist policy agendas built on cooperative principles. These two aspects of the Spanish confluences – the strategic transformation of municipal governance by citizen-led movements and the radical democratisation of urban political economies – epitomises the wider global movement for which they are its leading edge.

Barcelona en Comú is centrally involved in the organisation of the Fearless Cities network, which connects experiments in Asia, Africa, South and North America and Europe – authoring the guide showcasing the movement (Barcelona en Comú et al., 2019). As an embryonic

counter-hegemonic alternative to the established associations of international municipalism, Fearless Cities is not intermediated by national governments, international NGOs, philanthropic foundations or multinational corporations but rather governed by its members as an autonomous grassroots network, supported by ‘transnational alternative policy groups’, notably the Transnational Institute (TNI), researching and promoting democratic alternatives to neoliberal globalisation (Carroll, 2014). Fearless Cities provides a platform for activists, social innovators, mayors and councillors to share, learn and collaborate through online forums and regional summits held so far in Brussels, Warsaw, New York and Valparaíso with a second global summit mooted for spring 2021 in Amsterdam, where the TNI is headquartered and an innovative municipalist initiative, ‘99 Amsterdam’, is being developed by the city government in partnership with the Commons Network. Crucially, new municipalist connections are forged through building *solidarities* in the face of neoliberal austerity and capitalist ecocide – ‘solidarity-making’ contesting crises (Bayırbağ et al., 2017) – rather than through urban policy circulations.

Building trans-local solidarities has long marked urban struggles for radical democracy – from the Paris Communards to the Spanish anarchists (Featherstone, 2015; Kolioulis and Süß, 2018). Fearless Cities and other networks such as Refuge Cities (uniting refugee-friendly cities following Barcelona’s lead in the Syrian refugee crisis) illustrate how this tradition is contemporaneously re-imagined with digital technologies playing important roles. Online collaborative mapping, database and new media projects such as the TNI-funded Atlas of Utopias,¹ Cities of Change² and the Minim Municipalist Observatory³ help collect and disseminate information on like-minded initiatives emerging worldwide to inculcate cooperation, whilst intra-urban mapping of urban commons projects are a means to build

municipalist platforms (Bauwens and Onzia, 2017). These may play important parts in building alternative de-commodified circuits of value (Lee, 2006) both within and between cities to create counter-hegemonic municipal connections.

I Democratising the state and socialising the economy

New municipalism's novelty can be further elaborated in political and economic terms. First, the movement is influenced by neo-Marxist and feminist theory. Bookchin's libertarian municipalism is the movement's 'widely shared political vocabulary' (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017: 4) and the source of its name. Bookchin's (1987) ideas on democratic confederalism and social ecology are especially formative; that human plunder and destruction of non-human nature is the product of capitalist-colonial domination of humans by humans underpins (especially autonomist) municipalist affinities with eco-socialism and degrowth (Jarvis, 2019; Vansintjan, 2018). Lefebvre's (2003) 'right to the city' is frequently invoked, with social rights reimagined as open, dynamic and expansive rights of inhabitation based on participation in the (social) production of space rather than abstract, fixed and exclusive legal rights of territorialised citizenship defined by nation-state membership (Purcell, 2002). This is reflected in a motto of the Spanish confluences – 'democracy begins where you live' (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017) – expressed in municipalist campaigning around refugee action, for instance the Sanctuary Cities network in the USA and Barcelona's establishment of the Refugee City plan to welcome refugees and asylum-seekers.

The commons, to which capitalist 'enclosure is the historical antonym and nemesis' (Linebaugh, 2014: 1), is tightly entwined with new municipalism as a new 'spatial imaginary' manifested as a 'becoming common of the public' (Russell, 2019: 12) through 'public-common

partnerships' (Bauwens and Onzia, 2017; Russell and Milburn, 2018). The overarching motto of the Spanish confluences is *Ahora en Común* (Now in Common), reflected in various city platforms: 'Ahora Madrid', 'Barcelona en Comú'. Finally, feminist thought underpins the distinctive new municipalist process of 'collaborative theory-building' grounded in democratic deliberation (Russell, 2019: 12) encouraging imaginative reinterpretation over idolatrous adherence. The 'feminisation of politics' is posited to move beyond hierarchical, competitive and patriarchal relations towards more open, honest, transparent, relational and cooperative relations in 'transversal forums' with an ethos of dialogue, empathy, mutual care and listening (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). Feminism also infuses the movement with an emphasis on situated social reproduction over extractive production of commodities (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Politically, new municipalism ruptures traditional party politics. New municipalists reject both the vertical decision-making of elected representatives and social movement horizontalism, reflecting Hardt and Negri's (2017: 18) inversion of leadership roles: 'strategy to the movements and tactics to the leadership'. Where new municipalists seek electoral victory, this is not an end in itself but a means for implementing broader socialist strategies. The Spanish confluences seek to create a Gramscian counter-hegemonic historic bloc through alliance with left-populist forces at the national scale, notably Podemos, and the regional, such as the anti-capitalist, pro-independence Catalan party Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP), now supporting a new wave of radical-municipalist experiments across multiple municipalities in Catalonia (Bernat and Whyte, 2019). Russell (2019: 3) argues that new municipalists are careful not to reify the local state but instead see it as a '*strategic* entry point for developing broader practices and theories of transformative social change' – change oriented towards

radical redistribution of economic power and political decision-making.

This is captured by Debbie Bookchin – an influential figure in *Fearless Cities*, as her father Murray is for the movement – who posits that ‘new municipalism is not just about implementing progressive policies but about returning power to ordinary people’ (quoted in CLES, 2019: 4). Ada Colau repeats this sentiment with her characterisation of the movement as ‘an agora, not a temple’ – an arena for democratic deliberation and collective policy-building rather than a specific economic agenda. In the Spanish confluences, creative compromises have been made to negotiate the agora-temple dialectic by, for example, opening up public offices to citizen scrutiny and accountability and by deepening participation through institutional innovations such as neighbourhood assemblies, participatory budgeting and open-source digital voting platforms (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). Municipalists attempt to synthesise the analytic separation between political and economic democracy. Lefebvre (2003) and Bookchin (1987) highlight the false division in (neo)liberal thought between political/economic domains, emphasising their inseparability as dialectical moments in the production of space and social reproduction of society. Reflecting Bookchin’s ‘communalism’, Lefebvre resists the syndicalist fixation on worker control for a more expansive idea of *autogestion* (democratic self-management) by all citizens in popular assemblies (Gray, 2018).

These perspectives notwithstanding, economically speaking, new municipalism breaks with neoliberal urban entrepreneurialism (Lauermaun, 2018). The so-called ‘Barcelona model’, celebrated on the global fast policy circuit following post-Olympic boosterism, gentrification and touristification is now being contested (Blanco et al., 2019; Davies and Blanco, 2017). Barcelona en Comú pursues a counteracting democratic-socialist agenda centred on the incubation of cooperatives and

social enterprises, progressive procurement, remunicipalisation of public services and utilities, tighter regulation of tourism including sanctions on platforms like Airbnb, and promotion of social rights, notably housing, against rentier and gentrifier incursions (Blanco et al., 2019). New municipalists push for post-capitalist transition (Chatterton and Pusey, 2019) – aspirations discernible in Cooperation Jackson’s four ‘fundamental ends’, including moving beyond private property ‘to place the ownership and control over the primary means of production directly in the hands of the Black working class’ and beyond capitalist extraction towards the ‘development of the ecologically regenerative forces of production’ (Akuno and AkuNangwaya, 2017).

Nonetheless, continuities with neoliberal-entrepreneurialism abound. Lauermaun (2018) identifies a recent shift from more passive, reactive and competitive forms of urban entrepreneurialism to more active, interventionist and cooperative forms, in which cities diverge from neoliberal growth logics towards new agendas such as degrowth, smart cities, and urban laboratory initiatives. To this we might add the municipalist promotion of the social and solidarity economy, such as Barcelona’s recent proclamation of being its global capital. New municipalism embodies the trend towards a new kind of urban entrepreneurialism based on ‘experimentation’ rather than ‘speculation’ (Lauermaun, 2018) in which success is measured not by a return on investment but evaluated according to alternative measures, such as social value in progressive procurement policies.

A major point of departure from neoliberal entrepreneurialism is the (re)municipalisation of previously privatised public assets (Becker et al., 2015; Cumbers, 2012). Evident in Latin America and much of Europe, these interventions revive the tradition of municipal socialism prevailing from the late 1800s to the 1940s in much of Europe and the USA (Leopold and

McDonald, 2012). This centred on municipal enterprise in private markets and provision of natural monopoly utilities and services – epitomised by the pejoratively-named ‘gas-and-water socialism’ of British authorities such as Liverpool and Birmingham and the ‘sewer socialism’ of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Today, municipal enterprise is being reinvented in financialised form in the UK with the aggressive purchasing of commercial property such as shopping centres and the rolling out of special purpose vehicles to build affordable and for-profit housing to cross-subsidise austerity-threatened public services (Christophers, 2019). Such ‘financialised municipal entrepreneurialism’ no longer directly privatises public assets – as per neoliberal urban entrepreneurialism – but rather proactively brings assets and services into (albeit financialised) municipal ownership (Beswick and Penny, 2018). An alternative vision for ‘entrepreneurial municipalism’ in Liverpool suggests how municipalities might rediscover entrepreneurial powers in more holistic, inclusive and grounded ways rooted in the social and foundational economies (Thompson et al., 2020). Nonetheless, such experiments represent variations on a theme of a ‘pragmatic municipalism’ (Aldag et al., 2019) forged desperately in the bonfire of fiscal crises sparked by neoliberal state disciplining of local government. New municipalism stands apart from such contemporary municipalist mutations of urban entrepreneurialism and earlier socialist municipalism(s) by foregrounding democracy and the radical redistribution of decision-making; for proactively and systemically challenging capitalist crises from the grassroots – rather than reactively responding, however creatively, within limits imposed by the state.

2 Contesting urban crisis

Crisis, then, is critical to the formation of new municipalism, read historically through the structural-Marxist lens of deepening systemic

accumulation crises and quickening boom-bust cycles as capitalism exhausts new sources of profitable expansion (Bayırbağ et al., 2017; Karatani, 2014). Cities are increasingly the primary locus of production, capitalist extraction and collective experimentation with alternatives (Barnett, 2014); increasingly active players in shaping global space; the institutional forcefield through which capitalist contradictions are mediated, deflected and intensified (Bayırbağ et al., 2017). Capitalist history is marked by ‘techno-economic paradigms’ and macro-level Kondratiev waves driven by technological innovation, speculation and financialisation – revolutions in technics but so too in political institutions and social structures (Perez, 2002). Municipalism is productive of new societal formations enabled through technological as well as social innovation: transatlantic ocean-going steam-liners and the telegraph were conduits for both global colonial-capitalism and international municipalism; digital platform technologies energise the latest municipalist wave within Post-Post-Fordism (Murray et al., 2015).

Capitalist cycles and crises should not be ‘abstracted’ from social processes; they are as much a product of contestation by social movements as propelled by laws of capital – itself shaped by contestation (Featherstone, 2015). The first municipalist movements of the early 19th century can be read alongside the Socialist International and cooperative movements as part of the first ‘modern cycle of contention’ (Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1978) whose contestation of industrial capitalism and experimentation with alternatives shaped the next phase of state-regulated capitalism. Following the co-optation of the international municipalist movement into hegemonic governing logics, the second cycle of contention, in the ‘long 1970s’ social mobilisation against mass consumer capitalism and technocratic state managerialism, found expression in a municipalism with renewed radicalism: for example, ‘Red Bologna’ (Jäggi et al., 1977), Italy’s ‘Take Over

the City' movement (Gray, 2018) and, later, British municipal socialism (Cooper, 2017; Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987). The most recent cycle began in 2011 with the global protests of the squares reacting to the economic shocks of 2008, since crystallising into a re-politicisation of municipal and national politics, in the form of distinctly 'left-populist' movements and parties, such as Podemos, Corbynism and Die Linke, which claim to represent 'the people', united against the alien interests of capitalist oligarchies, through anti-austerity democratic-socialist visions for socialising production and re-municipalising public infrastructures (Dyer-Witthford, 2020).

By returning to parliamentary strategy and attempting to build alternative urban institutions, new municipalists make a novel move in the recent history of social movements and contentious politics. The social movement literature predominantly sees the transition from citizen-led protests into less disruptive and more formalised, durable, organised forms of contention – institutionalisation – as their moment of exhaustion and failure rather than success (Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1978). Yet, as Blanco, Salazar and Bianchi (2019) outline, Barcelona en Comú represents an apparently novel form and trajectory of political activism: *episodes of social protest* elaborated into *spaces of social autonomy* as sites for *new political subjectivities, strategies and organisational forms*. Something new in this latest wave, therefore, is the transdisciplinary bridging of domains resisting straightforward conceptualisation by traditional academic analysis.

New municipalism abandons making rights claims to the state in favour of building parallel *urban* institutions capable of meeting needs beyond the state. In this sense, they share with political practices of the 'urban everyday' a rejection of state logics for a distinctive modus operandi of 'the urban' – made both site and stake of political struggle. Beveridge and Koch (2019a, 2019b) characterise 'urban everyday

politics' as de-centring the state and foregrounding spatial practices in the 'here and now' rooted in everyday life which temporarily reshape or re-appropriate urban space or establish alternative urban systems to meet social needs, such as through cooperative housing, alternative currencies, community gardens and social centres. Where these 'alternative economic spaces' (Fuller et al., 2010), 'do-it-yourself urbanisms' (Iveson, 2013), experiments in 'transformative social innovation' (Thompson, 2019) and 'diverse economies' performing post-capitalist futures (Gibson-Graham, 2008) have struggled to find durable institutional form at sufficient scale to challenge dominant logics, new municipalism takes steps towards doing just that, through innovating municipal institutions for incubating, supporting and protecting their development; prefiguring an emergent 'political horizon of the urban' transcending state logics (Beveridge and Koch, 2019a, 2019b).

What characterises this urban horizon? New municipalism was born out of distinctly urban-based struggles against post-2008 austerity urbanism (Davies and Blanco, 2017) and draws on markedly urban-based practices in self-organisation, exemplified by the strong anarchist and federalist traditions in Barcelona (Blanco et al., 2019) and Catalonia more broadly (Bernat and Whyte, 2019). This reflects critical-urban-theoretical explanations for the contemporary coincidence of capitalist urbanisation, heightened contention and democratic possibilities – that power, injustices and concomitant struggles are increasingly urbanised (Barnett, 2014). Magnusson (2014: 1563) suggests that 'the urban' is the 'very form of the political, encompassing states and empires'; that 'proximate diversity stimulates self-organization and self-government, generates politics in and between authorities in different registers, and defers the sovereignty claims it produces'. However, following Barnett (2014), conflating the urban with contentious urban

politics risks the ‘local trap’ (Purcell, 2006) in which local scale is seen as automatically productive of democratic subjectivities.

Russell (2019) argues that new municipalism manages to avoid Purcell’s (2006) local trap through a ‘politics of proximity’ that has to be actively created out of urban conditions; a political *project* of proximity in which the urban scale is harnessed for the ‘concrete bringing together of bodies (rather than citizens, who already come with a territory) in the activation of municipalist political processes that have the capacity to produce new political subjectivities’ (Russell, 2019: 13). This resonates with Lefebvre’s notion of ‘the encounter’, articulated by Merrifield (2013) as the unique capacity of the urban to generate creative new combinations, solidarities and possibilities. However, Bookchin’s (1987) philosophy makes an ethical distinction between urbanisation and the city – seeing sprawling ‘megapolitan’ life as productive of capitalist scarcity and alienation; the ‘city’ as generative of a democratic politics of difference and ecologically-sustainable collective abundance (see Vansintjan, 2018). Gilbert (2018: 29) sees new municipalism as subverting the bourgeois ideology of the city as dangerously diseased and crime-ridden; re-appropriated as ‘a beacon of hope . . . as a key site for democratic energy and invention’. The Spanish concepts of ‘overflow’ and ‘confluence’ suggest a politics of the ‘multitude’ (Hardt and Negri, 2017) assembling in the (spatial and virtual) agora of the metropolis. The assembly has deep historical purchase on municipalist imaginations, drawing on Bookchin’s (1987, 2014) ideas for confederated assemblies (from neighbourhoods to city-regions) as the new institutional cell structure for a post-capitalist, post-state self-governed society, with antecedents in Athenian democracy, Arendt’s notion of council democracy, and the Paris Commune of 1871. Bookchin’s ideas have most influenced activists in Rojava (Öcalan, 2017) but are also popular in Fearless Cities.

The new urban horizon takes more tangible shape in recent developments in Berlin. Here, longstanding housing struggles have evolved since late 2018 into a broad-based campaign for a petition calling on the municipal government to compel private property companies with substantial portfolios to transfer their stock into common – not state – ownership (Beveridge and Koch, 2019a). The *Volksbegehren* petition is directed at the local state but subverts state logic by bypassing formal representative politics for an instrument of direct democracy in order to bring part of the urban commons into common ownership, specifically an independent, not-for-profit public organisation governed democratically by ‘representatives of urban society’ rather than of government (p. 11). The campaign movement comprises a diverse coalition bringing the dispossessed and precariat into alliance with anarchists and alienated middle-class property-owners through a politics of proximity and solidarity-making. Such paradoxically ‘*political anti-politics*’ (Beveridge and Koch, 2019a) – that is, transformative politics beyond formal liberal-democratic representative mechanisms – begins to hybridise and reconfigure the contours of the local state towards an urban, *municipalist* horizon.

III Three models of municipalism

Notwithstanding these shared relationships to transnationalism, urban crisis, state-transformation and political-economic democratisation, new municipalism is geographically, ideologically and socio-culturally variegated, containing highly-diverse, often-divergent and contextually-contingent projects – a diversity nonetheless cohering around three distinct-though-related ideal-types differentiated by their orientation towards the capitalist state: 1) ‘*platform municipalism*’ working in, against and beyond the state and platform capitalism via civil society mobilisation to establish new citizen platforms, often utilising digital

platform technologies; 2) ‘*autonomist municipalism*’ aiming for a stateless polis of confederated cooperatives, communes and assemblies through collective self-organising, motivated by anti-statist struggles for bio-regional and cultural self-determination; and 3) ‘*managed municipalism*’ aiming to retool the local state for the democratisation of urban economies through technocratic engineering. These are summarised in Table 1 but best understood by way of example.

First, platform municipalism is part of the emergent condition of ‘platform urbanism’ (Leszczynski, 2019; Richardson, 2020). Platforms are commonly conceived as new digital architectures and infrastructures such as on-screen interfaces and algorithms; as economic actors and new modes of accumulation, notably platform capitalism (Srniczek, 2016); and as discursive constructs for repositioning companies and cities within new markets – yet also as prefiguring a radically-reconfigured ‘platform society’ (Leszczynski, 2019). Platform municipalism points away from data-driven governance agendas of smart city discourses towards this latter possibility in advancing and socialising the reorganisation (already underway by platform companies such as Deliveroo) of the coordination of urban infrastructures, labour, mobilities and governance in ways which reterritorialize urban space and reshape citizenship.

Urban platforms ‘manifest as *flexible spatial arrangements* that are territorialized through a range of networked urban entities beyond that of the interface and the algorithm’ to produce ‘a new form of collective or public infrastructure, albeit neither free to use nor provided by the state’ (Richardson, 2020: 1, 3). Platform municipalists attempt to democratise urban platforms and utilise platforms in wider projects of urban-economic democratisation. Tentative examples include Ghent’s municipally-funded ‘Commons Transition Plan’ (Bauwens and Onzia, 2017), in which mapping of commons across the city provides foundations for a platform for their further development; and the ‘Office for Civic Imagination’ in Bologna, an experimental ‘co-laboratory’ for governing the commons (Foster and Iaione, 2016). The citizen platforms of the Spanish confluences can be seen as political embodiments of platform technologies. In Berlin and Barcelona are notable examples of attempts to curtail the power of urban-based platform corporations such as Uber and Airbnb by banning or restricting their practices within jurisdictions (Carson, 2017). Barcelona’s ecosystem of digital platform cooperatives and movement for technological sovereignty represents a counter-hegemonic recoding of the global smart city complex (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz, 2019; Lynch, 2019).

Table 1. Three models of municipalism.

	Platform municipalism	Autonomist municipalism	Managed municipalism
Examples	Barcelona, Spanish confluences, Berlin	Rojava, Jackson (USA)	Preston (UK), Cleveland (USA)
Source	Social movement-driven, rooted in urban politics of inhabitation/proximity	Social movement-driven, rooted in place-based cultural/racial identity	Technocratic/think tank project, rooted in community wealth building

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	Platform municipalism	Autonomist municipalism	Managed municipalism
Catalysts	Financialisation, dispossession, neoliberal austerity urbanism	Racist, extractive, eco-destructive practices of colonial-capitalist state	Neoliberal failure to resolve economic decline, urban shrinkage, deindustrialisation
Strategy/aims	Transform local state through dual power (in, against and beyond the state)	Realise democratic, eco-socialist self-governance (building a new polis outside)	Reclaim/regenerate local economy (retooling the state from the inside)
Means vs. Ends	'Agora-Temple' dialectic	'Agora' model (political process-oriented)	'Temple' model (economic outcome-oriented)
Institutional forms	New state institutions (digital platforms/co-ops, participatory budgeting, popular assemblies)	Confederation of autonomous self-governing communes and co-ops	Community-owned local institutions (worker-owned co-ops, community land trusts, anchor institutions)
Historical influences	Anarcho-syndicalism, cooperativism, federalism	Anarchism, national self-determination struggles	Municipal socialism, Fabianism (UK), guild socialism
Theoretical influences	Feminism, Right to the City (Lefebvre), commons (Federici), libertarian municipalism (Bookchin)	Feminism, degrowth, eco-socialism, libertarian municipalism, communalism	Cooperativism (Mondragon), pluralist commonwealth (Alperovitz)
Spatial imaginaries	Urban platforms, confluences (tides, overflow), the urban everyday	Confederated communes, bioregionalism	Leaky bucket, containing trickle-out economics, anchor institutional flows
Economic interventions	Socialisation of platform capitalism (technological sovereignty, platform cooperatives)	Non-commodified circuits of value (social reproduction, commoning)	Localised supply chains (progressive procurement policies, worker-owned cooperatives)

The boosterist-entrepreneurial Barcelona Model of the 1990s morphed into a smart city agenda by the 2010s for which governing elites pursued a post-political techno-solutionist project to remodel the 'city as software' through partnerships with multinationals like Cisco and Microsoft, repositioning Barcelona as the world's leading referent for smart urbanism and digital transformation (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz, 2019). This paralleled grassroots efflorescence in digital social innovation and platform cooperatives committed to 'technological

sovereignty' – reclaiming democratic public control over data and digital governance through open-source software initiatives and community-owned broadband and cloud infrastructures (Lynch, 2019). From 2015, Barcelona en Comú overhauled the top-down smart city strategy, terminated contracts with Microsoft and Cisco and redirected funding to digital platform co-ops through municipal incubators, placing technological sovereignty front-and-centre. Decidim Barcelona (We Decide Barcelona) was developed as an open-source online

platform for citizen engagement in decision-making, including participatory budgeting, described by its architects as ‘empowering social processes as a *platform for massive social coordination for collective action* independently of public administration’ (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz, 2019: 10–11). Here, the emphasis on autonomy from existing state institutions, via a platform technology embodying an urban logic, resonates with Berlin’s *Volksbegehren* campaign. Decidim Barcelona had, by early 2018, enrolled 28,000 citizens in active democratic decision-making, facilitated over 800 public meetings and produced some 12,000 proposals of which 9,000 have been incorporated into municipal policy, including the iconic (re)design of urban superblocks (*superilles*) that have made the city (even) more liveable for many.

Second, Cooperation Jackson, a citizen-led cooperative project in Jackson, Mississippi, is an exemplar of ‘autonomist municipalism’, moving progressively away from engaging with the local state towards building autonomous alternatives. Activists describe their approach as ‘dual power’ – ‘building autonomous power outside of the realm of the state’ in the form of popular assemblies and a ‘broader platform for a restoration of the “commons”’ whilst only engaging electoral politics on a limited scale in order to build radical voting blocs and elect candidates drawn from the ranks of the assemblies themselves (Akuno and AkuNangwaya, 2017: 75). Wielding the power of formal municipal institutions is a means to incubate and protect the development of a democratic solidarity economy from racist-state-capitalist incursion. Elected in 2013, the radical socialist mayor Chokwe Lumumba embodied dual power in his pledge to make Jackson the ‘most radical city on the planet’ and to materialise Cooperation Jackson’s aim: to socialise the means of production and democratise society. Since his untimely death in 2014, and his son’s election with a weaker mandate, Cooperation Jackson has

turned away from electoral politics to focus on socioeconomic autonomy and Black self-determination. Economic autonomy, ecological self-sufficiency and non-monetary exchange are being pursued through interconnected experiments in alternative currencies, time banking, food growing, renewable energy, circular waste reuse, community-owned housing, digital fabrication laboratories, makerspaces and worker-owned co-ops (Akuno and AkuNangwaya, 2017). The co-ops are organised as a federation democratically accountable to the community. A cooperative school provides political education, a community loan fund patient capital; all developed on land owned by a community land trust, reinvesting surpluses to create (relatively) autonomous circuits of value.

At the more radical, anti-statist end of the spectrum is Rojava, Syria, where Kurdish communities are resisting the socio-ecologically destructive colonial practices of the Syrian and Turkish states by establishing approximately 3,700 self-governing communes along eco-socialist lines (Jongerden, 2019). These are organised in an explicitly non-state form of democratic confederalism inspired by Abdullah Öcalan (2017), building on Bookchin’s (2014) concept of ‘libertarian municipalism’. The nation-state is rejected wholesale for reproducing anti-democratic hierarchies, gender inequalities and racial injustices, replaced by a confederated regional network of freely-associating directly-democratic popular assemblies at neighbourhood and municipal scales. This is the fullest expression of municipalist autonomy.

Third, at the other end of the spectrum, local authorities, think tanks and third sector organisations in the UK are adopting the new municipalist moniker to describe municipalisation of local economic circuits of value with priority placed on economic over political democracy. Preston in northern England has been labelled a ‘laboratory of Corbynomics’ (Bolton and Pitts,

2018) for the so-called Preston model, which involves generating and retaining local wealth through harnessing untapped spending powers of anchor institutions – public, non-profit organisations anchored to place with important civic functions, such as universities, housing associations and hospitals – by redirecting institutional budgets towards cooperative firms that employ local labour and produce social value locally rather than profits elsewhere. This is a strategy driven by progressive think tanks led by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) and the Democracy Collaborative, whose ‘community wealth building’ approach contrasts with more radical municipalisms. In a recent report, *New Municipalism in London*, CLES (2019) names Preston alongside Barcelona and Jackson as exemplars of new municipalism before exploring the contributions of three London boroughs (Camden, Islington, Hackney) to what CLES characterises as an embryonic new municipalist movement in the UK.

A foundational report for CLES’s progressive procurement approach, the New Economics Foundation (NEF)’s *Plugging the Leaks*, represents an urban economy as a ‘leaky bucket’ of water (Ward and Lewis, 2002). Resources ‘flow’ into a struggling local economy – via public funding or private investment – but greater quantities leak out, siphoned off by speculative investors or shareholders elsewhere. This neatly skewers ‘trickle down’ economics as ‘trickle out’. In its place is proposed a more sustainable self-enclosed economy of recirculating wealth via various mechanisms, such as alternative local currencies, based on the multiplier effect. NEF developed the policy tool LM3 (Local Multiplier 3) to help policymakers analyse how income circulates within a locality through three spending rounds – influential in the development of social value measurement and procurement policies across the UK, including for the Preston model. Importantly, the Preston model attempts to channel and contain otherwise fluid mobile capital through

procurement tools *and* collective ownership – including support for co-ops, community land trusts, municipalised pension funds and community banks.

The Preston model is adapted from the Cleveland model (Thompson et al., 2020), both inspired by the Mondragon Corporation in the Basque Country, the world’s largest network of cooperative firms (Rowe et al., 2017). In a context of industrial decline and severe urban shrinkage, the Cleveland model is cultivating a local movement of ‘Evergreen’ worker-owned co-ops specialising in anchor institutional contracts – laundry, food, renewable energy (Coppola, 2014). Although crucial local government support was eventually secured, the scheme was created by the US-based Democracy Collaborative and funded primarily by the Cleveland Foundation, one of the largest American philanthropic ‘community foundations’, endowed with \$1.8 billion. These technocratic and philanthropic origins place it outside local democratic control and arguably more in the realm of international municipalism. Unlike Cleveland, Preston is driven by elected local government representatives, appearing to share more with municipal socialism. However, these models are ‘municipalist’ in the sense of harnessing the municipal-urban scale to create a systematic, holistic and democratic approach to local economic development through a federated network of worker-owned co-ops accountable to community-owned trusts (Rowe et al., 2017). They gesture towards a new urban horizon in which economic democratisation and relocalisation are sought not through direct remunicipalisation but an alternative urban system of non-state actors with the local state as a partner anchor institution.

I Mapping municipal contradictions

Multiple tensions and contradictions mark the three varieties of new municipalism, understood as speculative-heuristic ideal-types intended to

frame and provoke further empirical investigation. First, broad ideological differences can be seen to separate autonomist and platform municipalisms, more associated with the global Fearless Cities movement, from managed municipalism, associated with transatlantic community wealth-building. Managed municipalism is intellectually grounded in Anglo-American liberal and pragmatist political philosophy, contrasting with the anarchist, feminist and neo-Marxist critical-theoretical roots of autonomist and platform municipalisms. Of abiding influence is Gar Alperovitz, the intellectual font of community wealth-building and co-founder of the Democracy Collaborative. His concept of a ‘pluralist commonwealth’ draws on liberal thinkers such as Rawls and Dahl to promote a ‘property-owning democracy’ of distributed ownership (Alperovitz, 2012). For Alperovitz, the answer to his guiding question – *if you don’t like corporate capitalism or state socialism, what do you want?* – is to be found in a renewed democratic-socialism at the municipal scale. Such foundations might explain why some Open Marxist scholars critique the Preston model for adopting a simplistic physical understanding of value as a thing to be ‘captured’ or ‘conserved’ in place through cooperative ownership rather than a socially-mediated dialectical relation between classes. It is this rejection of mediation, assert Bolton and Pitts (2018: 133–8), and its replacement by an immediate expression of value in things – mirroring populist notions of ‘the people’s will’ and ‘taking back control’ – that motivates (impossible) age-old appeals for ‘socialism in one country’. The possibility of municipal-socialism in our increasingly globally-mediated economy is problematised by Mondragon’s experience: the world’s most successful cooperative group has effectively internalised capitalism’s contradictions, relying on the exploitation of wage labour in the Global South in order to maintain its competitive advantage (Sharzer, 2017).

A common critique of the Preston model – tending towards protectionism in favouring local suppliers in procurement contracts which, if replicated across multiple economically interdependent localities, could lead to a competitive race-to-the-bottom – may be counteracted by cultivating solidarity markets with cooperative allies across scales that engage in non-commodified cooperative production for social value and ecological flourishing over private profit. In the scenario beginning to be pursued by cooperative cities (Sutton, 2019) – municipally-coordinated democratically-governed worker-owned co-op ecosystems embedded within and reliant upon global value chains – municipalities are relatively shielded from the injustices and contradictions of capital only for these to be displaced, outsourced and intensified up or down the chain. One solution might be international ‘solidarity markets’ incorporating evermore co-ops into transnational municipalist supply chains for increasingly de-commodified circuits of value (Safri, 2014). Cooperation Jackson’s vision is to reimagine the ‘totality of the value chain’ as a socialised, de-commodified and ecologically-sustainable supply chain, by forging trading connections with cooperative allies through trans-local associations such as the US Solidarity Economy Network.

Second, the question of whether democratising the municipal state is an end in itself or just the means to a broader economic agenda of radical transformation is reflected in tensions between an ‘agora’ approach, an open arena of deliberation embodied in collaborative theory-building and the feminisation of politics, and, alternately, a ‘temple’ model for the new economy. It is widely accepted that ‘UK strains of new municipalism are emerging from the vertical power of councils and councillors, while the horizontal power of local communities and activism is on the periphery’ (CLES, 2019: 7). Temple approaches are thus pragmatic responses to contextual conditions – the relative absence in

the UK of grassroots social movements, partly owing to class decomposition and neoliberal destruction of working-class solidarity. The Preston model has been pushed by local political advocates, not least Matthew Brown (now leader of the Labour-led City Council), attempting to cultivate a worker-owned co-op movement from the top-down in similar vein to Cleveland's Evergreen co-ops, which, as Ted Howard (originator of the Cleveland model and Democracy Collaborative co-founder) acknowledges, were a 'foreign concept' imported from Mondragon (quoted in Rowe et al., 2017: 58).

In her survey of 'cooperative cities' recently emerging across the USA, Sutton (2019) identifies Cleveland as an exemplary 'catalytic developer' city, in contradistinction to 'endorser' cities, whose municipal governments respond to pressure from below to validate existing movements, and 'cultivator' cities, with established grassroots-developed cooperative ecosystems further cultivated by municipal budgetary support. Catalytic developers, also including Richmond, Virginia, and Rochester, New York, stand out in this typology for attempting to catalyse co-op movements from scratch, by harnessing municipal resources, and for utilising the Democracy Collaborative as principal broker and policy designer. This technocratic policy-led approach to co-op development contradicts the experience of the world's three most successful cooperative regions: Mondragon, Quebec and Emilia-Romagna. In all three regions, co-op movements grew into flourishing sectors, supported by self-governed federated structures, *before* policy breakthroughs enabled their further growth (Rowe et al., 2017). The hope in Preston and other catalytic-developer cities is that citizen engagement with municipalist politics will be generated by the development of worker-owned co-operatives and community ownership, cultivating democratic subjectivities and

collective agency in self-expanding movements towards autogestion.

In the more horizontalist Spanish confluences, attempts to transcend liberal-democratic representational structures by inventing new forms (digital platforms), reinventing old ones (neighbourhood forums) or creating hybrids have often come up against the hard limits of the capitalist state and bourgeois class politics. Barcelona en Comú is one such casualty, losing a critical seat in the local elections in May 2019; Mayor Ada Colau was forced to make compromising pacts as traditional parties reasserted their power, diverging from the more radical wider Catalan movement (Bernat and Whyte, 2019). Strong forces of centralising state power impose obstacles: the Spanish government's recent 'Montoro Law' limits local government capacities and spending powers to pursue municipalist reforms, especially in re-municipalisation and staff hiring (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). Managed municipalism in the UK faces fraught centre-periphery relations dominated by the central state, successively subordinating municipalities even before neoliberal austerity, despite any so-called 'devolution revolution' (Ayres et al., 2018). In the US, city governments have circumscribed powers in relation to state (regional) government as well as federal (national) government. Nineteenth-century legislation, Dillon's Rule, made cities the creatures of state legislatures, with severe repercussions for Cooperation Jackson's plans, repeatedly thwarted by Mississippi state government, for instance, in their appropriation of the airport, a previously principal source of municipal funds which would have financed the radical programme (Akuno and AkuNangwaya, 2017). This signals the fragility of municipalist projects when founded on electoral strategies, pointing to the importance of 'dual power'. In Cooperation Jackson's tripartite strategic plan – establishing popular assemblies; pursuing political office; developing a solidarity

economy – priority was given to securing fast electoral wins and, following the Cleveland model, reforming municipal procurement and contracting policies. But progress in creating alternative economic spaces came only after electoral strategies were deprioritised. These difficult relationships with the state underline the importance of developing a solidarity economy locally and building solidarities globally through transnational connections and networks.

Third, success stories in municipalist and cooperative movements are rooted in long traditions of collective action, mutual aid and solidarity amongst communities with strong cultural identities, often informed by struggles for self-determination. Cultural and racial identity play important roles in Barcelona, influenced by Catalan national self-determination, and in the Black empowerment of Cooperation Jackson against the ‘white supremacist state’ (Akuno and AkuNangwaya, 2017). Unlike other new municipalist projects, inextricably tied to place, Jackson was chosen over Atlanta as the preferred site by a trans-American group of Black Marxist activists organised around the Malcolm X Grassroots movement, owing to favourable place-based factors in relation to threats from a racist surveillance state, predatory capitalism and climate breakdown. Where the political will exists, strategy-led (rather than place-led) approaches can develop new municipalist projects. Where strong collective identities and histories of self-organisation are conspicuously absent, it remains to be seen whether collective energy for local autonomy can be cultivated by policy interventions as opposed to emerging immanently. A tension is discernible between the universalist-socialist ethos of municipalism, rooted in international solidarity, and this more exclusive, identity-based method of mobilisation.

Fourth, claims that the municipal scale is just a tool for broader socialist aims contradict the key functional role played by ‘the urban’. If new

municipalism is defined in such general terms as the ‘democratisation of society’, the factor distinguishing it from broader socialist strategies is a politics of proximity, of urban inhabitance, as the crucial mediating factor in making new municipalist politics possible (Russell, 2019). Following the ‘new localities’ framework (Jones and Woods, 2013), this can be understood in two senses: as a locality’s ‘imagined coherence’ whereby municipalists build political ties or strengthen place-based identities through co-producing place; and ‘material coherence’, which defines the territorial remit of municipal/anchor institutions and geographical scope of functional economic areas as key to municipalist strategies of transformation. In both imagined and material coherence, a *politics of centrality* is present. Indeed, the Right to the City is in some sense the right to the ‘centre’ of decision-making over the production of political-economic life, to resist peripheralisation (Purcell, 2002). This is spatially embodied in the agora and the assembly, whilst anchor institutions tend to be located in urban centres, supported only by larger agglomerations. In depending on centrality, new municipalism is productive of uneven urban development and socio-spatial polarisation. For instance, Preston is fortuitous as the seat of Lancashire County Council and the University of Central Lancashire – civic functions many of its comparably-sized neighbours lack. Class is also an overlooked issue in a movement driven by the new urban left and technocrats. The Spanish confluences have sprung from a mainly young, highly educated, precarious ‘cognitariat’ or ‘creative class’ making alliances with a working class and migrant precariat (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). New municipalists act in the interests of subaltern groups but it remains unclear how far such voices are articulated or heard. Questions remain over the intersectional class politics of new municipalist movements, and how municipalist politics coalescing around urban

centrality relate to peripheral suburban and rural hinterlands.

IV Conclusion: Towards a platform for future research

As a renascent global movement, new municipalism renews a longstanding municipalist vision for the *polis* connected to the *cosmopolis* (Magnusson, 2014) superseding the nation-state by radically reorienting and rescaling territorial spaces to the supra-national/global and sub-national/urban scales. This reaches back to international municipalism but goes further, forward, towards a distinctly urban horizon. Entrapped by (territorial) state logics and disciplined by the (relational) law of (capitalist) value, international municipalism has become increasingly post-political following broader neoliberal trends (Leitner et al., 2018), building upon the apolitical origins of international municipalism in maintaining municipal connections across ideological and geographical difference (Clarke, 2012b; Saunier, 2002). New municipalism re-politicises and radicalises the municipalist tradition. Its transnationalism is based upon building solidarities between comrades rather than competition between rivals, organised through counterhegemonic grassroots networks such as Fearless Cities (Barcelona en Comú et al., 2019) and transnational alternative policy groups like the TNI (Carroll, 2014) as opposed to philanthropic foundations, international NGOs, national governments and multinational corporations (Acuto et al., 2017).

Above all, this is a project of transforming subjectivities through institutional change (Russell and Milburn, 2018). If 19th-century transatlantic municipalists believed municipalities (city-states) to be the universal cell structure of humanity's future (Saunier, 2002), new municipalists fetishise cooperatives and assemblies as the cell forms of a new economy and society and eulogise participation in deliberative decision-making as the pivotal lever for

transforming citizen subjectivities. Municipalist solidarity-making challenges the nation-state-enforced hegemony of universalist liberal citizenship and rights discourse. The thin, abstract notion of citizens claiming rights from a sovereign state, of all (national) citizens made equal before (state) law – mirroring all commodities made equivalent by the law of value – is rejected for an expansive right to the city in which participation in the production of space builds solidarities for the satisfaction of social needs and expression of desires. New municipalist politics grounds abstract international universalism in situated solidarity-making that transcends state-bounded liberal citizenship through a 'politics of proximity' (Russell, 2019).

In pursuing their most radical-transformative ends – 'the democratization of society and the socialization of production' (Akuno and Akunangwaya, 2017) – new municipalists must contend with both the (bourgeois) state and the commodity-form (and its concrete expression as money) as the two primary mediators of capitalist-social relations (Dinerstein and Pitts, 2018). So long as money mediates exchange, municipalities cannot escape the labour-capital relation. New (especially autonomist) municipalists attempt to develop (variously relatively) autonomous circuits of value (Lee, 2006; Safri, 2014) through the cultivation of new (and old) forms of economic activity that circumvent the commodity form, by (re)focusing on social reproduction, commons and collective self-provisioning. This involves building solidarities *within* and *between* municipalities: *intra*-urban spatialities – cooperatives, assemblies and platforms; and *inter*-urban spatialities – trans-local networks, collaborative mapping projects, solidarity markets and cooperative supply chains. In intra-urban space, research is required into how cooperative economies can be supported by municipal institutions. Developing a network of worker-owned co-ops is an aspiration of almost all municipalist projects – something shared with 'cooperative cities' (Sutton, 2019)

but differing in scale of ambition and political intent. Mondragon, despite its contradictions, remains a common source of inspiration. However, as the ambivalent experience of Mondragon attests, there are fundamental limits to the power of co-ops to overcome global capital's value form (Sharzer, 2017). This underlines the need to develop and research the development of trans-local networks of non-commodified cooperative exchange in the inter-urban dimension.

Tensions between building solidarities within and between cities reflect opposing tendencies articulated towards 'worlding' and 'provincialising' practices (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz, 2019). In seeking to supersede nation-states, municipalism has always looked outwards, to bring the cosmopolis to the polis and vice versa. Yet such worlding practices subject networked municipalities to the law of value – reducing connections to their exchange relations for a thin, universalist conception based on trade (in ideas), competition and comparison (Saunier, 2002). At the same time, radical municipalists attempt to build solidarity within their boundaries, between urban citizens, through cultivating cooperative and solidarity economies. This relies on 'provincialising intent' to attend to specific, situated social needs (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz, 2019). These opposing logics are mediated by municipal institutions, pulled in opposing directions. Which is winning out is palpable in Barcelona en Comú's aspirations to become the global referent city for a network of 'rebel smart cities', to build a new Barcelona Model of holistic digital democracy (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz, 2019). In 2018, alongside New York City and Amsterdam, Barcelona initiated the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights, a UN Habitat-backed network for circulating ethical standards and best practice guidelines among a growing cohort of some 25 cities. How this is any different to the fast policy networks of international municipalism remains to be seen.

To understand these trajectories, future research should focus on documenting the development in real time of such networks as Fearless Cities, drawing on methods developed in mobile urbanism and policy mobilities to trace the connections being made (Clarke, 2012b; Peck, 2011). Crucial to this endeavour is a need to move beyond my limited North-Atlantic focus here towards trans-regional studies of 'actually existing comparative urbanism' across Global North and South (Clarke, 2012a); to investigate how constructions of 'ordinary' (fearless) cities and world 'referent' (rebel) cities are shaped by, and shape, worlding and provincialising practices. Following Clarke (2012b), overemphasising the 'newness' of current experimentation risks overlooking important insights into continuities and cyclical returns of ideas from previous moments of municipal contention. For example, the municipal radicalism of the Greater London Council (GLC) prefigured new municipalism (Cooper, 2017) in being driven by a small band of 'economic guerrillas' (Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987) including Doreen Massey, Paul Gilroy, Robin Murray and Hilary Wainwright, who continues to advance municipalist ideas as a fellow of TNI and the editor of *Red Pepper*. These were the first disciples of the distinctive *in, against and beyond* strategy originally coined by a collective including the Autonomist-Marxist John Holloway and Labour politician John McDonnell (who became GLC Chair of Finance) in a seminal book entitled *In and Against the State* (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979). In its dying days, axed by Thatcher, the GLC bequeathed resources for the establishment of a research centre, CLES, to take on the mantle of furthering democratic economic strategies (Peck, 2011) – an act finding fruition in new municipalist growth in Preston today.

An empirical-historicist approach to studying municipal connections and cyclical returns, building on Saunier (2001, 2002), can bring

events, actors, technologies and organisations into dialectical conversation with cycles of capitalist crisis and contention. New municipalism was born in the crucible of a crisis created by capitalist over-accumulation, financialisation and speculation, to contest neoliberal austerity urbanism. Just as historic labour struggles and cooperative movements shaped Post-Fordism, an Autonomist-Marxist perspective understands (especially managed and platform) municipalisms emerging today as co-constitutive with Post-Post-Fordism – contestations productive of new capitalist formations (Featherstone, 2015). For instance, platform municipalism – like other left-populist surges, such as the Indignados and Corbynism, which have taken struggles ‘from the street to the state’ – is closely connected with its capitalist analogue, platform capitalism: both emerging in response to fallout from global-financial crisis, accelerating the search for technological-economic innovation and speculation in platform enterprises, which have in turn accentuated the urban debt crisis, precarity and inequality motivating platform municipalists (Dyer-Witthford, 2020). Platform municipalism has been enabled by the very same technologies developed through platform capitalism and, indeed, pushes the latter in new directions, potentially humanising – and thus making socially viable – this next phase of accumulation.

This places new municipalists in an ambivalent relationship to social change, class and state power; torn between fostering autonomous urban systems and engaging directly in state space to capture power and occupy institutions (Bayırbağ et al., 2017; Beveridge and Koch, 2019a). Through the neoliberal 1990s, Holloway’s ‘in and against the state’ mantra mutated into an imperative to *change the world without taking power*, but is today being reinterpreted by municipalists in renewed engagement in (local) state space. Yet their theory of change departs from past (more combative,

insurrectionary, rebellious, militant) approaches to seizing the state or the means of production – for instance, in municipal-socialist Red Clydeside in early 20th-century Glasgow and the Militant Tendency-led Labour Council in 1980s Liverpool – for a more collaborative, incremental prefigurative radical-reformism via transformative social innovation (Thompson, 2019). Those who have travelled the parliamentary road to radical reform have faced the repressive apparatus of the capitalist-state, often becoming co-opted as mere administrators of existing systems (Dyer-Witthford, 2020). Some new (especially platform) municipalisms are left-populist in that they merge movements and parties to create new coalitions that unify disparate groups – the alienated and dispossessed – thereby obfuscating the social antagonisms and class conflicts suffusing capitalist society. The state is an institutional field in which competing class forces – albeit dominated by the bourgeoisie – are mediated through representative institutions. By de-centring the state and foregrounding progressive alliances, new municipalists risk replacing a politics of antagonism with an (albeit radical-transformative) anti-politics of consensus (Beveridge and Koch, 2019a). Left-populist platforms benefit from attracting allies and vanguard groups (such as anarchists and autonomists) otherwise opposed to electoral or state-transformational approaches (Dyer-Witthford, 2020). Yet municipalist vanguardism threatens their ability to include, mobilise or represent the material interests of less-empowered, disenfranchised social groups who do not necessarily see the immediate benefit of participating in worker-owned co-ops, 3D-printing labs, online participatory budgeting or neighbourhood assemblies. This raises questions about their legitimacy and potency as socialist strategies.

The political promise of municipalism is the bridge it builds between alternative economic spaces that prefigure post-capitalist futures and the institutional supports at the municipal or

city-regional scale required to nurture and sustain them – through constructing ‘alternative regionalisms’ (Jonas, 2013) or reimagining existing state territorial structures (Cooper et al., 2019). Research questions remain over the scalar geographies and spatialities of emerging municipalist regionalisms and the apparent reliance on centrality. How can different municipalisms shape ‘material coherence’ (platforms/anchor networks) into ‘imagined coherence’ (place-based citizenship/solidarity-making) (Jones and Woods, 2013) – and vice versa – for unitary cities and bounded intra-urban municipalities but also for sprawling metropolitan city-regions and diffuser still bio-regions? While I have focused on *relational* spaces of flows, the bounded *territorial* dimensions of new municipalism require deeper consideration (Jonas, 2013). The municipalities explored above are diverse places nested within differently-configured legal, fiscal and electoral structures. How to compare the seemingly incomparable contexts of the ‘world city’ of Barcelona with the regional state capital of Jackson with the ‘ordinary city’ of Preston or the interdependent metropolitan London boroughs of Camden, Islington and Hackney? How do – and can – new municipalist movements contend with the splintering of political geographies through metropolitan fragmentation, suburban secession and enclave urbanisation? Might new municipalism offer opportunities for bridging the fragmented electoral and fiscal geographies of the city-region?

As a pre-paradigmatic field, municipalist spatialities are still evolving through experimentation and contestation. One concrete abstraction through which alternative regionalisms are beginning to take material shape is the ‘flexible spatial arrangement’ (Richardson, 2020) of the platform. Just as Amazon and Uber are reconfiguring capitalism through digital algorithms and platform technologies, new municipalists are building organisational and digital citizen platforms that link together

diverse urban coalitions and infrastructures. Elsewhere, the city itself is being reimagined as a platform – in the development of alternative, place-based strategies for generating and recirculating wealth locally through the urban circuitry of anchor institutions, cooperative enterprises and other non-state organisations, or through de-commodified and commonly-owned autonomous urban systems. Alongside *platform* municipalism, I have discerned two further varieties: *autonomist* municipalism prefigures a ‘stateless’ confederation of democratically self-governing communes; *managed* municipalism re-engineers the existing state apparatus for the democratisation of local economies. These are meant as theoretic ideal-types which overlap and interplay in messy contextual hybrid-combinations, as heuristic organising concepts to simplify complex trends.

Conceptual differences are visible in their approach to being in, against and beyond *capital*. Managed municipalism attempts to manage and control the flow of capital through its borders, preventing it ‘leaking out’ by building more self-contained circuits of value through anchor institutional support of local co-ops via progressive procurement. Autonomist municipalism seeks autonomy from the commodity form through constructing more autonomous, self-sustaining de-commodified circuits of value rooted in social reproduction and commoning (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2019). Platform municipalism attempts to challenge the growing dominance of platform capitalism over urban everyday life (Srnicek, 2016) by innovating digital platform technologies to democratically coordinate alternative urban systems or working towards collective control over the platform and algorithmic technologies that increasingly organise production, distribution and consumption (Fuchs, 2020; Morozov, 2019).

Such differences reflect a contemporary schism in post-capitalist thought between a left-populist, techno-utopian, automation-

accelerationist post-work agenda and a prefigurative alternative based on commoning, social reproduction and degrowth (Chatterton and Pusey, 2019; Dinerstein and Pitts, 2018). Yet these tensions can be found *within* as much as between ideal-types. All three exhibit tendencies in multiple directions; embedded case study research is required to trace trajectories. One trajectory shared by all new municipalist variants is towards collectively controlling capital flows, shortening supply chains, socialising finance, creating self-sufficient circular economies and re-localising wealth creation – reflecting degrowth thinking, in attempting to heal the metabolic rift opened up by capitalism’s growth logic (Jarvis, 2019). Indeed, Preston’s ‘leaky bucket’ imaginary mirrors watershed-bounded bioregionalism promoted by autonomist-municipalists and eco-socialists alike, including Bookchin (1987). Tracing synergies between new municipalist and degrowth discourses, following Vansintjan (2018), would be a valuable endeavour.

Municipalism has an important role to play in connecting and coordinating at city-wide (as well as inter-urban) scale commons projects at the local. As common infrastructure is increasingly augmented and mediated by digital technologies, possibilities emerge for the development of democratic ‘feedback infrastructure’ to govern the city as a commons and inaugurate ‘digital socialism’ (Morozov, 2019), for cities themselves to be conceptualised, analysed and governed democratically as platforms. How might municipally-supported cooperative provision of housing, transport, childcare, laundry and recycling be governed through socialised platforms? How might the digital algorithmic feedback infrastructure utilised by Amazon, for instance, be socialised and coordinated at the municipal scale? Research is required into how technological sovereignty is advanced by municipal platforms (Lynch, 2019); how platform municipalism evolves in contestation to, and dialectical interplay with,

platform capitalism; how it contends with the contradictions inherent to platform urbanism, not least the paradoxical pull between the *decentralisation* of data production among platform users and its *recentralisation* in programme projections and articulations (Richardson, 2020).

If we recognise (with Lefebvre and new municipalists) that knowledge production – *conceived space* – is critical to the historical production of space, then it matters how we conceptually model, map and mediate platform municipalism. From a strong-theoretical perspective (Gibson-Graham, 2008) – adopting ‘techno-masculinist tendencies to advance universalizing apocalyptic critiques’ (Leszczynski, 2019: 3) – platform spatial imaginaries problematise new municipalist claims to a radical-democratic politics of the ‘agora’. An ironic, anti-political reassertion of the ‘temple’ entails assumptions – ‘couched in specific left-theoretical understandings that postulate the essential beneficence of techno-democracy’ (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz, 2019: 15) – that replace the universalist-reformist postulates of international municipalism (Saunier, 2002) with new ones: that democratic participation is intrinsically beneficent and citizens are essentially incorruptible and acquiescent in subordinating their class interests to consensus-seeking digital-democratic processes in online platforms (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz, 2019) or indeed the pre-ordained wisdom of cooperative economic structures. The range of politics that platform municipalism enables appears determined in advance by the models of economic democracy and modes of digital participation programmed by vanguard agents. If Lenin’s formula for ‘communism’ was ‘soviets plus electricity’ and left-populist techno-accelerationists’ formula for post-capitalism is ‘UBI plus AI’ (Dyer-Witford, 2020), then that for platform municipalism is ‘co-ops/assemblies plus digital platforms’. Lurking within platform municipalism is a (political-economic) design

determinism that ironically mirrors the post-politics of smart city computational-programming of urban space and citizen subjectivities – threatening to advance conditions for reproducing platform capitalism. Yet read through a ‘minor theory’ lens alert to radical indeterminacy, empirical contingencies and political potentialities for more ‘hopeful theorisations’ (Leszczynski, 2019) of embryonic combinations of municipalist politics, platform technologies and the urban everyday, we might just begin to see this emerging territory, with eyes less ‘shaped (misshaped) by the earlier landscape’ (Lefebvre, 2003: 29), in the new light of a distinctly urban, *municipalist* horizon.

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Notes

1. <https://transformativecities.org/atlas-of-utopias>
2. <https://realisingjustcities-rjc.org/cities-change>
3. <https://minim-municipalism.org/>

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