

Politicising proximity: Radical municipalism as a strategy in crisis

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Abstract

As new municipalism comes of age, prefixes proliferate: from democratic and autonomist to post-growth and care municipalisms. How do all these variegations relate to each other and to the wider movement of which they claim a part? What does all this conceptual creativity amount to, epistemologically and politically? How can we distill the most salient lessons for the further development of theory and practice in the years ahead? This article is our attempt to answer such questions and to define more precisely the contours of this emerging field of praxis. First, we delineate within new municipalism the target of our analytical gaze – *radical* municipalism. Radical municipalism is not simply progressive policies happening in cities, and should not be conflated with pragmatic, entrepreneurial or state-centric perspectives. Rather, we argue it is a speculative *hypothesis* about how systemic transformation might be wrought through coordinated action at the urban or municipal scale, understood as a strategic entry-point for counter-hegemonic struggle. Key here is *proximity* and the politicisation and socialisation of proximate relations of encounter and assembly. Second, we delve deeper into what we identify as four salient dimensions marking this terrain – economic reorganisation, democratisation of political decision-making, feminisation of politics, ecological transformation – as a multi-dimensional lens through which to introduce, and situate within the wider literature, the 15 articles that comprise this double special issue. Throughout these contributions to the theory and practice of municipalist strategy, the issue of *crisis* looms large: both historically, as an animating spur to action and opportunity for political intervention, *and* operationally, as a structuring condition and limiting factor of a strategy arguably in crisis itself. Finally, we reflect on the epistemological, methodological and political implications of pursuing radical municipalist strategies in the current conjuncture.

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摘要

随着新地方自治主义的发展成熟，其前缀不断增加：从民主的、自治论的、到后增长的以及关怀的地方自治主义不一而足。所有这些变体之间，以及它们与其所声称的更广泛的运动之间，有着怎样的联系呢？从认识论和政治学来看，所有这些概念创意到底意味着什么呢？我们如何才能获取最重要的经验教训，以便在未来几年进一步发展理论和实践？我们试图通过本文回答这些问题，并更准确地定义这个新兴的实践领域的轮廓。首先，我们在新地方自治主义中划定了我们的分析目标--激进地方自治主义。激进地方自治主义不只是发生在城市的进步政策，不应该与实用主义、城市创业主义或国家中心的观点混为一谈。相反，我们认为它是一个投机性假设，是关于如何通过城市或地方层面的协调行动来实现系统性转变。它被理解为反霸权斗争的战略切入点。这里的关键是邻近性，以及相遇和集会的邻近关系的政治化和社会化。其次，我们探究我们认为界定了这一领域的四个重要方面--经济重组、政治决策的民主化、政治的女性化、生态转型，将其作为多维的视角，通过它们来介绍这一双联特刊中所包含的15篇文章，并将其置于更广泛的文献背景中进行考察。本文的研究为地方自治主义战略的理论和实践做出了贡献，其中危机问题尤其重要：不管是从历史的视角看，还是从操作上看，都很重要。从历史的视角看，它是行动的动力和政治干预的机会，从操作上看，它是战略的结构条件和限制因素，可以说，是关于危机本身。最后，我们反思了在当前形势下，追求激进地方自治主义战略的认识论、方法论和政治意义。

关键词

公民大会、公地、生态转型、经济民主、政治的女性化、新地方自治主义

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Introduction

Writing almost a decade on from the first stirrings of new municipalism – its figurehead *Barcelona en Comú* was formed in mid-2014 – this is an opportune moment to take stock and reflect on the achievements of a movement only just beginning to come of age. As municipalist praxis has proliferated, so too have descriptors and typologies, with multiple municipalist monikers springing up across this diverse field; prefixes range from ‘new’ (Roth, 2019a, 2019b; Russell, 2019) and ‘democratic’ (Shelley, 2022) to ‘autonomist’, ‘platform’ and ‘managed’ (Thompson, 2021b) to ‘pragmatic’ (Warner, 2023) and ‘entrepreneurial’ (Thompson et al., 2020) to

‘degrowth’ (Vansintjan, 2018) and ‘post-growth’ (Schmid, 2023). With the publication of this double special issue, we can add many more: care municipalism (Kussy et al., 2022), southern municipalism (Pinto et al., 2022), peripheral municipalism (Toro and Orozco, 2023), territorial municipalism (Arpini et al., 2022) and weak municipalism (Béal et al., 2023). All this typological creativity certainly suggests a vibrant, ‘pre-paradigmatic’ scholarly field of empirical enquiry trying to keep up with fast-moving, diversifying experimentation on the ground (on pre-paradigmatic fields, see Nicholls, 2010). However, there is also a danger, here, of too many concepts jostling for attention in a congested marketplace, causing confusion

and obscuring what's at stake. How do all these variants or variegations relate to each other – and to the wider movement of which they claim a part? What does all this conceptual creativity amount to, epistemologically and politically? How can we distill the most salient lessons for the further development of theory and practice in the years ahead?

This article is our attempt to answer such questions and to define more precisely the contours of this emerging field of praxis. It is structured into two parts. In the first part, we start by delineating within so-called 'new' municipalism, as it is most commonly called, the target of our analytical gaze here – that is, 'radical' municipalism. Rather than seeking to confuse with yet more categories, this is our attempt at defining what, precisely, is *radical* about municipalism, by way of dispelling common confusions with merely progressive, pragmatic, state-centric perspectives; a necessary exercise, we feel, for introducing the theme of this special issue – municipalist *strategy* – and uncovering the kernel of radical municipalism's distinctive strategic approach to systemic change. Next, we burrow into the radical core of this municipalist 'hypothesis' to identify the urban (and rural) spatialities of municipalism and the necessarily place-based relations of proximity, encounter and assembly that animate its distinctive politics. Third, we explore the significance of crisis for municipalist strategy; both in terms of how crisis shapes municipalism as social movement(s) and how – especially in its electoral turn towards 'occupying the institutions' of the local state – this is shaped by the crisis conditions of capitalist state machinery, and is arguably now a strategy itself in crisis. Radical municipalism, we argue, not only responds reactively to conjunctural crises, but proactively exploits crisis-laden historical moments as opportunities to strategically unsettle hegemonic settlements; to place a wager on political futures.

In the second part, we delve deeper into what we identify as four salient dimensions marking this terrain – economic reorganisation, democratisation of political decision-making, feminisation of politics, ecological transformation – a multi-dimensional lens through which to introduce and situate the 15 articles that comprise this double special issue. Finally, in the conclusion, we use the heuristic advanced in this article to assess radical municipalism's contributions to transformative social change and reflect on epistemological and methodological avenues drawn from critical urban studies for extending enquiry in future action and research.

What's so radical about radical municipalism?

New municipalism is a marker in time, connoting an entirely novel reinvention, or more continuous renewal, of a broad historical trend, a theory and a praxis called municipalism. Predominantly, this has meant drawing on histories that have taken the local level as the site for pushing towards a radicalised political, economic and social agenda. In the case of Spain, where the term has most frequently been used, the prefix 'new' is meant to distinguish recent experiments from a long municipalist tradition (Orduña Rebollo, 2005). In some places, new municipalism – sometimes called 'neo-municipalism' (Mocca, 2021; Pirone, 2020) – is all too easily misinterpreted as a rediscovery of 19th- and 20th-century municipal socialism (Leopold and McDonald, 2012) and international municipalism (Clarke, 2012; Saunier, 2002) for the 21st century (e.g. Association for Public Service Excellence [APSE], 2018; Centre for Local Economic Strategies [CLES], 2019).

Some scholarly discussions of the recent global remunicipalisation phenomenon, for example, have pronounced this the return of a 'pragmatic municipalism', apparently

oblivious to the wider new municipalist movement with which it shares its name (Warner, 2023). In practice, while attempts at (re)municipalisation are frequent features of new municipalist movements (e.g. Angel, 2021; Becker et al., 2015; Paul and Cumbers, 2023), this rescaling of the delivery of services remains a creature of the state, with perhaps just as much in common with the ‘new state capitalism’ (Alami et al., 2023; Peck, 2023) as with the new municipalism. At whatever scale we care to look, the state’s recently rediscovered interventionist role in the proactive management of capitalism is a marker of a conjunctural turning point away from previous iterations of neoliberalism and towards some sort of new state capitalism, whose rise, Peck (2023: 2) notes, ‘signals a significant geohistorical moment (maybe not a new “era” as such, but a notable inflection point for sure)’. At the local level, this might translate into or at least accommodate certain new municipalist approaches. Yet these kinds of municipalism – pragmatic and entrepreneurial, invested in managing local economies in more-or-less progressive, though nonetheless state-capitalist, directions – are decidedly *not* what we are looking at here, nor what this special issue is about.

We can see the rise of the city as a political actor as another misguided example of new municipalism where radicality is absent. The conventional approach to municipal planning and policy innovation – promulgated by the likes of C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, Rockefeller Foundation’s 100 Resilient Cities, the Global Covenant of Mayors and United Cities and Local Government, all plugged into philanthrocapitalism and the global non-profit industrial complex, and championing discourses and methodologies such as ‘resilience’ and ‘design thinking’ (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020; Barnett, 2022) – is increasingly celebrated as best practice and enrolled in fast policy model mobilisation in a growing assemblage

of inter-city and transnational urban policy and mayoral networks united by the belief that ‘cities can save the planet’ (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020: 2212). This municipalist-adjacent approach frames the city as the privileged site of experimental solutions to – as well as the source of – ‘wicked problems’ (complex problems resisting simple technical resolution), not least climate breakdown (Barnett, 2022). This constitutes the liberal-capitalist flipside to radical municipalist translocalism: likewise promoting inter-urban cooperation, knowledge sharing and solidarity, but within a merely ‘progressive’, accommodative, technocratic frame that fails to challenge the radical root of these problems.

Radical municipalism, by contrast, seeks to make a clear break both with the state-led municipalist imaginaries of the past and present, and with the simplistic championing of the ‘urbanising’ or ‘localising’ of policies. It points instead towards a more radical tradition devoted to constructing an alternative polity to that of the nested, hierarchical, patriarchal liberal-democratic capitalist state. This radical tradition is rooted in the communist – or, rather, ‘communalist’ (Bookchin, 1987, 2015) – imaginary of the commune inspired by the Paris Commune. Radical municipalism ultimately aims to build alternative polities based on the commune to replace politics that reproduce the nation-state, patriarchal power structures and colonial capital accumulation.

Radical municipalism is thus not simply ‘progressive policies happening in cities’ or economies that have been municipalised – conflated with this though it sometimes is (for a critique, see Thompson, 2021a). Rather, it is a particular orientation to, and process of, transformative social change in which the municipal scale is approached as the privileged ‘strategic entry point’ (Russell, 2019: 991). First and foremost this is about ‘radical’ as opposed to merely ‘progressive’

change – pursuing structural transformation from the root, rather than incremental reforms in accommodation with hegemony (for distinctions between radical and progressive, see Beveridge and Naumann, 2023; Thompson, 2023). Typically emphasising the ‘prefigurative’ nature of radical transformation – that is, ‘anticipating or representing something that will happen in the future’ (Monticelli, 2022: 17) – radical municipalist interventions attempt to embody in present practices, and condition the possibilities for, a democratically envisioned future society. They are – at least ideally – committed not only to certain goals, policies, and concrete outputs but also to a specific way politics is done. These experimental practices typically embody what Bookchin (1987, 2015), the theorist of libertarian municipalism and communalism, envisaged as ‘non-hierarchical forms’ that subvert ‘coercive hierarchies’ and structures of domination, including: class power (property-owners over property-less), state power (officials over citizens), patriarchy (men over women), racial supremacy (white over black), gerontocracy (old over young), imperialism (core over periphery) and anthropocentrism (humans over non-human nature) (see Shelley, 2022). Prefiguration across these domains informs radical municipalist principles, policies and practices, from the feminisation of politics (Roth et al., 2020) to degrowth or postgrowth transitions (Schmid, 2023; Vansintjan, 2018) to radical forms of democracy (Roth, 2019a; van Outryve d’Ydewalle, 2019).

The core of radical municipalist strategy, then, is its ambition to transform citizen subjectivities and ideological ‘common sense’ through prefigurative experimentation alongside institutional innovation (Russell and Milburn, 2018). This entails shifting both the definition of power and its distribution: from a top-down ‘power-over’ to a bottom-up ‘power-with’ model (Roth et al., 2020). Interdependence and everyday

relations are key to building power in politics, economy and society. The strategy is committed to interventions that more-or-less work within present constraints but that simultaneously create ‘transition pathways’ (see Chatterton, 2016) to alternative futures. This places radical municipalism very much in the realm of lived experience, everyday life, and the ‘urban everyday’ (Beveridge and Koch, 2019) – a realm of daily rituals, libidinal energies and private as well as collective desires. For Bookchin (1987, 2015), accessing this immediate, phenomenological level of human life is fundamental for municipalist transformation, as the ‘hierarchical mentality’ of capital, state and other forms of domination is embedded in society at a ‘molecular’ level. The enduring allure of face-to-face, non-hierarchical, deliberative dialogue in popular assemblies for the reformation of civic character and political subjectivities through confrontation with the desires and rationalities of others underpins radical municipalism (Bookchin, 2015; Roth, 2019b; Shelley, 2022); a school in the art and craft of collective self-government.

Though important, the radical municipalist hypothesis is more than the sum of prefigurative politics. We find some commonality here with Erik Olin Wright’s (2010) theorisation of the interrelation between three mechanisms of systemic change: ‘ruptural’ (revolutionary struggle); ‘symbiotic’ (reform of existing structures); and ‘interstitial’ (prefigurative alterity in the interstices). In crude terms, symbiotic and interstitial mechanisms respectively reflect the two poles of radical municipalism’s ‘dual power’ approach: taking (and transforming) existing state power by ‘occupying institutions’; and building alternative counter-powers ‘in the shell of the old’, centred on the commune (Bookchin, 2015). As interstitial practices grow in strength and number, and as symbiotic reforms contribute to shifts in socio-economic and political possibility, viable

ruptural change may eventually be possible. Radical municipalist experimentation with new institutional forms or hacking existing ones – blending symbiotic and interstitial approaches – has also produced some interesting results. For instance, municipalist collectives have often created citizen platforms that use the form of the political party to bring social movements into public institutions (Monterde, 2019), combining the symbiotic and interstitial in innovative ways that can be adapted to the local circumstances and legal regulations. In the domain of the commons, it has generated hybrids between existing state power and municipalist, communalist or ‘commonist’ counter-power: public-common partnerships (Russell et al., 2022a, this issue), commons-state institutions (Bianchi, 2022, this issue) and a wider trajectory of ‘becoming-common of the public’ (Mendez et al., 2021). This is where municipalist strategy intersects with the commons and commoning as a movement mobilised ‘in, against and beyond’ capitalism and the state (Chatterton and Pusey, 2020; Cumbers, 2015; Thompson, 2021b) – the in, against and beyond, here, somewhat analogous to symbiotic, ruptural and interstitial change, respectively. In contrast to more traditional forms of municipalism, we view radical municipalism as harnessing symbiotic action primarily to help achieve and protect interstitial, prefigurative change in the here-and-now, with ruptural revolution as its long-term horizon.

There is, no doubt, a need for greater theoretical and strategic clarity as to what this means in practice, recognising we are not starting from a position of consensus amongst those working with the radical municipalist hypothesis. Strategies differ, according to the local circumstances, and so do the long-term goals – more or less radical, depending on the case. Across this plural terrain of transformation, there are debates and divergences over what, exactly,

constitutes transformative or radical change of social and institutional forms. How far can the capitalist state and liberal-bourgeois law, for instance, be transformed from the inside or out – by developing creative, experimental and performative practices to ‘prefigure’ a new kind of state or law (Cooper, 2017; Thorpe and Morgan, 2022, this issue)?

There are many ‘boundary cases’ documented in this special issue – examples of municipalist praxis that fall short, in one way or another, of their radical prefigurative or ruptural promise but which nonetheless cast light on the contours of the field, its boundaries with adjacent practices, or on the barriers it needs to surmount in order to be successful (Joubert, 2022; Thorpe and Morgan, 2022). Up against the definitions advanced here, most if not all of the cases in this special issue – even of the most paradigmatic new municipalisms of Barcelona, Zagreb and Naples – struggle to live up to this radicalism. This speaks to the limitations of drawing such conceptual definitions – intended merely as a heuristic to understand ideal-typical topographies, geohistorical connections and political potentials – as much as to the difficulties and challenges faced by municipalist struggles under severe crisis conditions.

Paradoxically, perhaps, struggling to ‘live up to the radicalism’ is itself one of the enduring features of radical municipalism. Rather than a timeless or contextless theory, one that seeks to stand resolutely in the face of all those who challenge it, the radical municipalist hypothesis ought to be understood as an intrinsically ‘open’ process. In putting this hypothesis into practice, there is a certain inevitability of coming up against limits, challenges, contradictions and failures: of elected platforms becoming ‘institutionalised’, of participatory practices running out of steam, or of autonomous initiatives becoming isolated, ossified or co-

opted. Yet it is better to understand such failures (and successes) neither as verification or refutation, but as political acts that enable a process of ‘collaborative theory building’ (Russell, 2019); something akin to a giant collective action-research cycle. This special issue is one contribution to such a cycle, an effort to keep the radical municipalist hypothesis moving forward through an engagement with a broad set of practices and initiatives from substantially different contexts.

The spatiality of radical municipalism

Running through all of this is the wager – *apuesta*, as used in the Spanish context (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014) – that the best way to begin precipitating system-wide shifts is through towns and cities. However, taken at surface level this can be misleading. When groups such as *Observatorio Metropolitano* identified the municipality as the place ‘we can make a democracy worthy of the name a reality’, this was premised on the proposition that ‘democracy is either a democracy of proximity, “among equals”, or it lacks any basis whatsoever’ (2014: 143, our translation). Central to understanding the spatiality of the radical municipalist hypothesis is recognising that this starting point is not based on an erroneous claim that ‘the local scale is assumed to be inherently more democratic than other scales’ or ‘more sustainable, just or culturally diverse’ – a perspective which Purcell (2006: 1921, 1924) calls the ‘local trap’. Such a perspective can lead to claims that cities have some form of fundamentally progressive character or ‘natural urban aptitude for piecemeal and episodic collaboration’ that renders them ‘likely building blocks for a viable global order’ (Barber, 2013: 148); to a belief that ‘cities can save the planet’ (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020).

The priority radical municipalism gives to towns and cities is not, then, derived from some essential character of the built environment. Rather, it is a result of the contradictory scalar urban processes that produce these environments and which give rise to ‘the paradox of social existence under contemporary capitalism: [that] never [before] have human beings been more social in their existence, but more individualised, privatised, in the apprehension of their existence’ (Read, 2012: 120). While our lives are infinitely enmeshed with others, other places, other people, other ecologies, our experience of this enmeshment is predominantly *anti-social*. The radical municipalist hypothesis works with the perspective that this enmeshment is typically at its most intense within urban spaces, which act as the ‘hinges’, ‘knots’ or ‘joints’ that mediate between scales and levels, between structure and agency, historical movements and conjunctural contingencies, global forces and local particularities (see Goonewardena, 2018, for a Lefebvrian reading of the urban as mediation; and Leitner et al., 2019, on a conjunctural analysis of the urban).

From this perspective, the strategic-spatial proposition of radical municipalism is twofold. Firstly, although concerned with fomenting system-wide transformations, the wager is that the most productive entry points are where our (anti)social enmeshment is at its most intense, and thus where the greatest latent potential exists for a *becoming-social* of this enmeshment. Radical municipalism is thus not defined primarily by a commitment to ‘local’ politics, but to a ‘politics of proximity’ (Subirats, 2016), one that is most often but *not* exclusively possible within towns and cities. Secondly, radical municipalist interventions – whatever their thematic or sectoral focus – are focused on both *intensifying* our proximity to other people, places, and ecologies, and on a *becoming-social* of these proximities. It is for this

reason that an expansive understanding of democracy runs so deeply through radical municipalist agendas.

Two further observations arise from this reading of radical municipalism as a politics of proximity. Firstly, it is perfectly plausible to have progressive and redistributive local government policy that has little to do with the radical municipalist wager, which speaks to the distinction between *radical* and the wider *new* municipalisms outlined above. This demands articulating with greater clarity the link between particular concrete interventions and their radical character. For example, building and improving access to public housing is one of the essential global imperatives of our time, and local and regional governments often play a key role in this. While there are approaches to the collective provision of housing that can be understood as part of a radical municipalist wager (see Ferreri, 2021; Ferreri and Vidal, 2022; Holm et al., 2022), there is not an inherent relationship with radical municipalism. The same can be said whatever the thematic area or sector we focus on. Indeed, a useful distinction might be made between a ‘municipal pragmatism’ which ‘centres on a specific ethos of engagement with the policies and practices of local government’ (Barnett et al., 2020: 507), and a radical municipalist orientation where the policies and practices of local government are tangential to the central focus.

Secondly, if the built environment of the city is understood not as the essential substrata of a radical municipalist politics, then a radical municipalist agenda appears plausible in ostensibly rural or peri-urban locations, although this will likely have different strategic implications. As Subirats (2019): 168, our translation) suggests, ‘it is necessary not to restrict oneself to the confines of what has traditionally been understood as “city”, with its logic of local administration and limited territorial and political space’.

Nonetheless, however small, peripheral or ‘rural’ are the urban sites for radical municipalism, they are still in some way premised upon the logic of proximity, encounter and assembly – key formal characteristics of the municipality, the polis and the commune, and underlying dynamics of the urban. The obvious practical implication here is the expansion of radical municipalism as a research agenda that looks beyond cities (certainly beyond local governments); that works outside of narrowly-defined disciplinary boundaries. The radical municipalist hypothesis does not share ‘the long-entrenched obsession among many urban scholars with demarcating a neat boundary between city and non-city spaces in a world of increasingly generalised urbanisation and rapidly imploding/exploding urban transformations’ (Brenner, 2018: 574). This calls for a consideration of the strategic differences in pursuing a radical municipalist politics across contexts, both in terms of the particular forms these interventions take, and what this means *strategically* with respect to identifying ‘productive entry points’ to wider systemic transformations.

Municipalist strategy in crisis?

If radical municipalism exists as a hypothesis, then a key feature – and source – of its praxis is seeking to take advantage of conjunctural crises as opportunities for systemic change. Radical municipalism is a set of strategies, often born out of crisis conditions, which attempt to prise open and exploit the fissures, fractures, fault lines, the state and market failures, the weaknesses of patriarchal ways of organising, and the intersectional class antagonisms and systemic contradictions that these crises make patent and intensify. First, radical municipalist interventions are in some sense *reactive* ‘contestations’ to crises, made possible by a conjunctural opening in politics, which in the contemporary European

context is often traced back to the 2008 global financial crash (Featherstone et al., 2015). These are contestations to crises across multiple domains – from the ‘financial’ crisis of asset devaluations, escalating debts, mortgage defaults and foreclosures and the ‘urban’ crisis of austerity, privatisations of the urban commons and accumulation-by-dispossession (Russell et al., 2022a, this issue), through the ‘social reproduction’ crisis of care (Kussy et al., 2022, this issue), the ‘governability’ crisis of ‘the public’ (Bianchi, 2022, this issue) or of urban regimes (Bua and Davies, 2022, this issue; Milan, 2022, this issue; Sarnow and Tiedemann, 2022, this issue) and the ‘political’ crises of representation and of ‘legitimation’, in which traditional social-democratic parties are in freefall and party politics in radical realignment (Béal et al., 2023; van Outryve d’Ydewalle, 2019, this issue) to the ‘ecological’ crises of climate breakdown, resource exhaustion, environmental pollution, and ecosystem degradation (Sareen and Waagsaether, 2022, this issue; Schmid, 2023).

Radical municipalist struggles are in some sense just that: *struggles* – much like comparable contestations that work in, against and beyond neoliberalism and austerity, capital and the state (Cumbers, 2015; Featherstone et al., 2015). But that is not all they are. Radical municipalism is not simply a knee-jerk reaction to protect against the inter-sectional crises of ‘cannibal capitalism’ (Fraser, 2022); rather, it is a positive vision and proactive strategy – an *apuesta*, or speculative wager – to cohere a transformative movement driven by the fundamental principle of expanding collective self-governance. As such, the four dimensions of radical municipalism that we identify and discuss in what follows – economic reorganisation; democratisation of political decision-making; feminisation of politics; ecological transformation – can each be understood as affirmative responses to correspondent

conjunctural crises: of capitalist accumulation and of social reproduction; of the state and representative decision-making; of patriarchal rules of privilege and domination; and of ecological and climate breakdown. In this way, radical municipalism has a dialectically generative relationship with crisis.

It is in this double-sense of crisis that we originally conceived the theme of this special issue as *Municipalist Strategy in Crisis?* – crisis understood as both shaping the historical conditions for and, increasingly, the practical operations of radical municipalist strategy itself. In seeking, at least in some cases, to ‘break the glass ceiling’ (Roth, 2019a) of traditional social movement organising – making the decisive move from ‘occupying the squares/streets’ towards ‘occupying/building new institutions’, explicitly and visibly challenging the state and capital (Blanco et al., 2020) – radical municipalist strategy is especially vulnerable to getting knocked and bruised along the way, not least by hitting hard up against a hostile state machinery, the limits of capital’s accommodation and a deeply patriarchal culture. There is a sense in which radical municipalist strategy is frequently crisis-riven, faltering at hurdles or falling down altogether when running against intransigent partisan, capitalist and patriarchal logics.

Several of the articles in this issue describe this ‘crisis of municipalist strategy’ either explicitly (Bua and Davies, 2022) or implicitly (Béal et al., 2023; Sarnow and Tiedemann, 2022). Bua and Davies (2022) recount a Galician activist’s metaphor of a broken car representing the state machinery that activists are attempting to re-engineer – weighed down by ‘loading the vehicle with more luggage’ before sufficient progress is made with ‘fixing the engine’. This captures the problem of focusing too much on progressive policies – the luggage – to the detriment of institutional transformation. The inverse problem occurs in France, where, as

documented by Béal et al. (2023), ‘weak’ municipalist citizen lists focus their energies on instilling participatory procedures – a proceduralism denounced by some as ‘citizen washing’ – at the expense of ‘reaching working-class neighbourhoods’ or of constructing a common ideological project of distributive justice capable of building a counter-hegemonic base. In Zagreb, municipalist activists have become so bogged down in unravelling and reversing the privatised, patronage-based, corrupted and clientelistic public procurement contracts of the previous, right-populist administration – while strenuously enforcing transparency, accountability, and due process by, for instance, demonstratively *not* appointing their own people to key strategic positions in the state machinery, in paranoid pre-emptive appeals to an inimical media – that they undermine their own capacity to follow through on either participatory procedures or policy promises (Milan, 2022; Sarnow and Tiedemann, 2022). The crisis dynamics this produces between movement members and vanguard officials weakens the connection between symbiotic and interstitial power and places further stress on those in government, tightening the screw.

The four dimensions of radical municipalism

In drawing the contours of a research agenda on radical municipalism, we have maintained a somewhat ambivalent position regarding the inclusion of progressive policies as a frame through which to undertake radical municipalist research. In particular, we wish to guard against the idea that the radical municipalist hypothesis can be extrapolated through a sectoral or policy focus. This can all-too-easily result in the bundling together of a set of keywords – such as ‘cities’, ‘housing’, ‘municipal’, ‘participation’ and ‘radical’ – in the linguistic wrapper of

radical municipalist discourse, but which loses altogether the specificity of the radical municipalist hypothesis. Indeed, it is already a challenge to navigate through literature that harnesses the language of ‘new’ and ‘radical municipalism’, but where the focus is more closely aligned to a municipal pragmatism (cf. Morley and Morgan, 2021; Purcell and Ward, 2022; Thompson et al., 2020). Those working with radical municipalism as a research agenda must become more attuned to these distinctions, and more clearly articulate the relationship between particular interventions and their radical municipalist character. This challenge runs through all the papers included in this special issue and, as a pre-paradigmatic field, we encourage the reader to engage critically.

To this end, we suggest four principal dimensions to the radical municipalist hypothesis: economic reorganisation, democratisation of political decision-making, feminisation of politics, and ecological transformation. These are not discrete fields, either conceptually or in practice. Many of those working to re-embed and democratise the economy are doing so through an exploration of how we can ‘hack’ the legislative and practical competencies of governmental actors. Many of those developing technopolitical democratic interventions are doing so informed by specific feminist critiques of existing institutions. Nominally ‘ecological’ interventions find themselves rooted in understandings of how people develop collective agency through distributed *and* more formal political and economic arrangements. These different dimensions thus inherently overlap and infer one another, such that practical experiences can rarely be sorted into neat categories such as ‘economy’, ‘democracy’, ‘ecology’ or ‘feminism’, let alone more sectoral approaches such as housing, food, water, mobility or energy. This is why we propose these four dimensions as a heuristic – a mental shortcut that

allows us to sketch out the contours of radical municipalism – rather than a definitive statement about what a radical municipalist politics always looks like. More specific sectoral interventions and policies, such as the development of specific approaches to the democratic remunicipalisation of water and energy, cooperative housing, or collective cultural spaces can therefore be read and evaluated *through* these four dimensions.

For our current purpose, this heuristic allows us to provide some clarity and framing to approaching a research agenda on radical municipalism. The 15 contributions to this special issue go some way to elucidating these four dimensions, but they also illustrate some of the comparative blind-spots and oversights in critical radical municipalist research to date. In what follows, we have attempted to address this through a brief engagement with other research, published predominately over the past five years, such that this paper signposts readers to the wider literature. Yet the relative lack of research in some of these dimensions – especially ecology and feminism – indicate that many critical perspectives and practices have still not permeated into academic debates; that the links between these dimensions and radical municipalist strategy are insufficiently developed. This is, admittedly, a shortcoming of this special issue as much as it is of wider radical municipalist research. We hope for this heuristic and the special issue in general to act as a waymarker for future research.

Economic reorganisation

To say that that radical municipalist theory and practice is concerned with economic reorganisation is to purposefully leave it open to a breadth of heterodox economic perspectives and forms of action, while also providing some clear orientation. To talk of re-organising the economy is a fruitful

starting point, invoking ideas of a ‘Polanyian countermovement’ and to posit something akin to an ‘antagonistic economy’ that ‘goes beyond building alternatives’ to also ‘make challenges’ (North et al., 2020: 335) to hegemonic understandings of what ‘the’ economy *is* and the policies and governance structures – within both the state and enterprises – that reproduce it. As articulated by contributors to a recent edited collection published by *Fearless Cities* – the international network that arguably catalysed new municipalism (Russell, 2019) – this is an orientation that understands that ‘the promises associated with perpetual economic growth (jobs for everybody, good money for all, and general well-being) turn out to be a fantasy’, that we must find ways to ‘transition... into a pluriverse of alternatives’, whilst ‘rethinking ideas like “work” and “prosperity”, for instance, are good starting points to widen these conversations’ (in Miralles-de-Imperial, 2022: 98, 101).

Numerous conceptual frames can be brought into conversation within this dimension; more visibly the social and solidarity economy (Eizaguirre Anglada, 2021; Thompson et al., 2022) the common(s) (Bianchi et al., 2022), diverse or community economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006) and degrowth (Schmid, 2023; Vansintjan, 2018), along with certain interpretations of the foundational economy (Russell et al., 2022b) and community wealth building (Thompson, 2023) among others. Each of these conceptual fields have their own internal diversities and debates, intersections and overlaps with one another, and are mobilised differently in different localities. Yet differences between these conceptual frames should not be overstated. What matters is that organised communities are using whichever concepts they find useful in cohering the practices of an antagonistic economy; not to pursue the creation of a ‘social’ economy that runs parallel to the public and private sector (see Amin

et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 2022 for critiques), but to further the relationship between the interstitial, symbiotic and ruptural mechanisms alluded to above (Wright, 2010).

Nonetheless, certain recurring themes are particularly salient to the radical municipalist hypothesis of re-organising the economy. The first is a fundamentally feminist view of ‘the economy’ and what counts as economic activity, one that confronts the narrowness of productivist economics and the ‘capitalocentrism’ of orthodox Marxist and neoclassical schools (Gibson-Graham, 2006), and calls for particular attention to strategies that can collectively intervene and remodel collective social reproduction (Federici, 2020). This means those things which are ‘foundational’ to living well – housing, food, mobility, education, water, energy, care, and so on – are at the centre of an antagonistic economic strategy. In areas such as care, this specifically requires ‘a transformation of the current division between care and wealth, as well as between the economic sphere and the reproductive one’ (Kussy et al., 2022: 14, this issue). The intersection between the pressures of tourism and affordable housing, and the challenges in navigating such issues when faced with entrenched regime interests, are a recurring theme (Bua and Davies, 2022, this issue). It also extends to areas such as the development of ‘counter logistics’ – new forms of popular supply chains and infrastructures of production in sectors such as food. That such projects are ‘seeking ways of problematizing what we understand as public, a terrain where the State motorizes and finds allies in administering the commons’ (Minuchin and Maino 2022: 19, this issue) reflects the radical municipalist focus on how a politics of the common can intersect and remake our understanding of the public (Bianchi, 2022, this issue; Russell et al., 2022a, this issue).

What some have referred to as a *becoming-common of the public*, this entails ‘fighting to recover, through collective self-organisation, the decision-making spaces of those resources necessary to satisfy our fundamental needs’ (Mendez et al., 2021: 8, our translation). Here the common does not refer to individualised economic arrangements, but a political horizon in which the ‘sovereignty’ of the public shifts away from state organs and towards organised communities. This entails a diversity of experiments in which organised communities engage directly with state bodies (and municipal bodies in particular) to guarantee the (re)production of foundational goods, whilst simultaneously looking to enhance and expand social autonomy. This puts an emphasis on ‘the importance of legal innovations in the development of mechanisms capable of recognising concrete experiences of communalization’ (Mendez et al., 2021: 9), and a prefigurative understanding of the law as flexible, performative and reconfigurable for ends counter to the liberal-bourgeois capitalist nation-state (see Thorpe and Morgan, 2022, this issue).

A number of paradigmatic cases are emerging in this field. Bianchi (2022, this issue) highlights the ongoing development of Barcelona’s *Patrimoni Ciutadà* (Citizen Assets) programme, exploring how it stems from the possibility that ‘what is public (a municipal asset) can become a common (citizens’ asset)’ (Castro and Forne, 2021). The case of Can Battlo, a former factory site brought under community management, is particularly emblematic here (Asara, 2019) and demonstrative of ‘an alternative way to understand the city and the relationships between citizens and institutions’ (Parés et al., 2017: 190). In Naples, efforts to establish the *Acqua Bene Comune* service similarly demonstrate ‘the multiple configurations that common–state institutions can adopt’ (Bianchi, 2022: 10, this issue). Work on

‘public-common partnerships’ is explicitly theorised as a radical municipalist approach in which ‘the expansion of democratic control of resources in the present simultaneously enhances our capacity to push for change that goes beyond the limits of what is currently politically possible’ (Russell et al., 2022a: 20, this issue). This goes to the core of an antagonistic approach to re-embedding the economy, where ostensibly economic interventions are ‘a social gear of radical transformation that makes possible the becoming-common of the public, and the subordination of the market to society’ (Mendez et al., 2021: 8–9, 24, our translation).

Democratisation of political decision-making

Participation is arguably *the* empty grand signifier of our age – increasingly mobilised alongside ‘sustainability’, ‘democracy’ and ‘resilience’ by global mayoral networks and urban policy innovators (Barnett, 2022). Radical municipalism, by contrast, seeks *not* to enrol citizens in participatory processes and technocratic consultation exercises (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2017), but rather to institute new forms of decision-making and cultivate new subjectivities that deepen democracy across all domains and levels of society. The cell-form of this real democratisation is the popular assembly, although radical municipalism has embraced diverse institutional forms. In Bookchin’s (2015) thought, the institution of the assembly lies at the heart of the commune form that radical municipalists wager will supersede the capitalist nation-state. Based on a number of historical precedents – from the Athenian polis to the Paris Commune – the assembly enables direct, face-to-face, deliberative democratic decision-making in which desires and decisions are shaped by confrontation with others’ preferences, and policies are decided

through conflict, consensus and voting. Technocrats and experts are kept at arms-length from politics and made wholly accountable to the assembly; while delegates are mandated (and fully recallable) by the assembly to merely administer popular decisions at ‘higher’ scales of confederated regional assemblies. The distinction between politics proper and the ‘logistical’ operations of ‘statecraft’ is central to Bookchin’s understanding of libertarian municipalism – a salient distinction which Minuchin and Maino (2022, this issue) explore in relation to logistics.

The commune effectively constitutes one pole of the ‘dual power’ approach that defines certain strands of radical municipalist strategy. Building on Lenin’s original strategy of developing worker-controlled soviets as a counter-power alongside communist party rule of the state as a transitional stage to communism, municipalist dual power seeks to develop prefiguratively democratic institutions and practices, centred on assemblies, as interstitial counter-power to the nation-state, while also attempting to take (local) state power itself, through mobilising social movements as citizen lists and non-party platforms to contend for election, leveraging local government resources, if successful, to support counter-power (Bookchin, 2015).

The question of how these theories of the assembly play out in practice, where democratic principles run up against the compromised realities of electoral representative politics, is taken up by many of the contributions to this special issue. They chart how, in recent years, radical municipalists have tried different ways of building political power from below: presenting activists as candidates in local elections; supporting candidates but remaining autonomous; creating local assemblies completely autonomously from the local state; advocating for the transformation of local institutions towards

participatory decision-making – amongst many other proposals. One shared assumption is that representative democracy based on the nation-state is in decay; that popular political power cannot be shared (or built) within this framework and that national and regional political parties together with public officials (and through them all kinds of interest groups) remain the key obstacle to really democratic decision-making. This hollow democracy is now facing a crisis of legitimacy. The citizen platforms created in 2014 in Spain were deeply impacted by the *no nos representan* discourse of the 15M (Roth et al., 2019). In Naples, Zagreb or Belgrade, an anti-establishment sentiment was key to the justification of bringing power back to people (Milan, 2022, this issue; Pinto et al., 2022, this issue). The form of the local assembly where citizens participate directly and not through representatives – strongly advocated by Bookchin (2015) – was on the table in the French local elections of 2020 (Béal et al., 2023, this issue; van Outryve d’Ydewalle, 2023, this issue), but also more generally in the *Fearless Cities* network (Barcelona en Comú et al., 2019). Radical democracy has been the most salient element of radical municipalist experiments, and it includes two principles: making democracy less representative and more participatory; and devolving power to the local level, where face-to-face interactions and the immediate scale makes possible more horizontal decision-making mechanisms (Roth, 2019a). The aim is not, however, to parochialise politics, but to create new networks and confederations of municipalities where power flows from below.

Although the Spanish recipe of uniting social movements in a *confluencia*, drafting a code of ethics to limit professionalisation, deciding on a manifesto through open participation and running for elections, proved very successful in electoral terms in 2014 (Monterde, 2019), Bua and Davies (2022,

this issue) show to what extent a real *regime change* is possible. They analyse the cases of A Coruña and Santiago de Compostela and explain that (in addition to some conjunctural factors) both the resistance of the hegemonic regime (the administration and the existing political parties) and the expectations of the social movements generated a situation where the margin for manoeuvre was severely restricted. The case of Naples differs from Spain’s in that here social movements have opted for staying neither inside nor outside formal institutions. Pinto et al. (2022, this issue) argue that radical municipalism *stile napoletano* is not based on a procedural view of participatory democracy, but on a more political, conflictual model. Despite the apparent benefits of spontaneity – adapting to the local culture and avoiding institutional sclerosis – the limitations of this approach are revealed as an incapacity to endure.

Van Outryve d’Ydewalle (2023, this issue) studies the case of Commercy to show yet another limitation of municipalism: when focused overtly on procedures, the project can lose steam and fail electorally. Here, the distinctly Bookchinese strategy was to build an autonomous citizen assembly and then run for elections. But with almost no policy content to discuss, the assembly weakened, and the candidates were left with little support. The very same problem is analysed across four French cases by Béal et al. (2023, this issue). Strong participatory agendas met resistance from the political party system, which, although itself facing a strong crisis of legitimacy, nonetheless remained a formidable force in structuring the political field. Milan (2022, this issue) describes the paths taken by municipalist activists in Belgrade and Zagreb, reflecting on the limitations of their projects. Her focus is not so much on the *how*, but on the *why* of these decisions, in a political context marked by authoritarian-populist trends. She argues

that local activists have been inspired by the radical municipalist experiences of other places and by the Yugoslavian self-managed socialism of the recent past.

If these papers focus on the participatory aspect of building counter-power, Thorpe and Morgan (2022, this issue) bring new attention towards the expansion of local power vis à vis the state. By analysing the case of Sydney, they argue that though ‘prefigurative legality’ might not be radical, merely progressive, this nonetheless presents a tool for reconfiguring the state form and redistributing its power. Slowly and progressively, the boundary case of Sydney shows a possible pathway to radical municipalism, deploying legal prefiguration alongside or in the absence of more familiar tactics.

Feminisation of politics

The fact that the first female mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, is one of the leading figureheads of the new municipalist movement worldwide reveals deep roots in feminist theory and practice (Roth et al., 2020). But feminising politics goes far beyond gender balance, as argued by Lovenduski (2005) in her famous essay. Municipalism’s ‘feminisation’ – or ‘feministisation’ – of politics is concerned with a radically divergent form and content of politics to the liberal-bourgeois representative processes of the patriarchal, imperialist capitalist-nation-state. Feminisation begins with dispelling masculinist-capitalist ideology that power is allocated through competition, regulated through confrontation, and maintained through domination; rather, power is not a zero-sum game but a generative force for world-building and cooperation, and it is necessarily a collective enterprise. This alternate politics is based not on abstract proceduralism and due process codified in juridical law and enforced by the state’s monopoly on violence (although structure is

important to avoid domination by informal institutions) but rather on cultivating open, honest and cooperative subjectivities based on horizontal face-to-face interactions, dispositions to change, and trust (Roth et al., 2020).

What this means in practice is a more collaborative and distributed form of leadership widely shared and conditioned by democratic dissensus. Feminisation of politics goes further than Hardt and Negri’s (2017: 18) inversion of traditional leadership – ‘strategy to the movements and tactics to the leadership’ – to radically democratise even tactical decision-making. One approach to this is the distinctively municipalist form of the assembly, in which wholly-recallable delegates – not elected representatives – are mandated by popular decisions made by the assembly through deliberative and consensus-based decision-making (van Outryve d’Ydewalle, 2019, 2023, this issue). As Caren Tepp, of Ciudad Futura in Rosario, Argentina, has remarked: ‘a leader is not the coach of a football team. She’s more like a captain, who plays alongside the others, who knows them and is there for them. She can make mistakes and be called into account like any other’ (Roth et al., 2020: 47). This rejects traditional masculinist ‘boss’ politics in which a ‘strong man’ – almost always a man – destroys his opponents, upholds hierarchies and centralises power through a deeply personalised and patronage-based politics.

Such an ingrained culture comes under close scrutiny by contributors to this special issue, not least Sarnow and Tiedemann’s (2022) deconstruction of the masculinist state machineries in Barcelona and Zagreb, intersecting with corrupt, clientelistic, neo-liberal networks. They draw attention to the ‘masculinist grammars’ embedded in the state through the patriarchal social relations of capitalism, and evaluate the difficulties encountered by municipalist activists in

rewriting these codes. Here, we find resonances with Joubert's (2022, this issue) account of the 'prosaic' practices navigated by the radical-feminist 'activist state workers' of the Greater London Council (GLC) of 1981–86. In some respects, the feminisation of politics might come unstuck in upholding a prefigurative ethics to the detriment of winning and maintaining power as conceived and instituted under national-state-capitalism; abandoning confrontation even with hostile opponents may undermine strategic efficacy just as it prefigures an alternative. The historical example of the GLC, eventually outgunned by the masculinist repertoires and superior powers of Margaret Thatcher, suggests the immense strategic difficulties, scalar contradictions and irreconcilable trade-offs inherent in attempting to 'prefigure' a different, more feminist kind of local state within the rules of the game set by the capitalist nation-state (Cooper, 2017; Joubert, 2022, this issue). The feminist principles of non-violence and peaceful protest – alongside non-punitive and collaborative forms of governance within movements – may suffer a similar fate, when up against deeply hostile and powerful capitalist and nationalist forces.

The case of Zagreb reveals how such masculinist grammars become inscribed in social policy and, in turn, the materialities and imaginaries of urban everyday life (Milan, 2022, this issue). Up until the municipalist platform *Zagreb je naš* won power in 2021, the city was ruled for over a decade by a patriarchal-populist-authoritarian mayor, Milan Bandić, who diverted public funds away from substantive socially-reproductive capacities, notably childcare, towards symbolic ethno-nationalist projects such as war monuments (Sarnow and Tiedemann, 2022, this issue). Since coming to power, *Zagreb je naš* activist state workers are trying to shift municipal policy in the other direction, to support social reproduction and care. This

example illustrates how a feminist ethics of care infuses both the process of radical municipalist politics itself and the socio-economic policies and practices it advocates for. Much of this endeavour is about ensuring gender equality in both the political domain – in electoral lists, board members, mandated delegates – as well as in the wider spheres of production and social reproduction.

Municipalist efforts in social reproduction focus on accounting for and making visible tasks traditionally performed by women, such as domestic labour in capitalism's 'hidden abodes' (Federici, 2020; Fraser, 2022; Gibson-Graham, 2006), as well as improving labour conditions and instituting social justice in the formal economic sectors of health and social care. This is precisely what Kussy et al. (2022, this issue) document with respect to *Barcelona en Comú*. Clearly, a formal righting of wrongs in quantitative terms is not enough: a wholesale 'molecular' transformation of value and social relations (Bookchin, 2015) is required to materialise the feminist imaginary of the 'caring city' – through what Kussy et al. (2022, this issue) characterise as 'care municipalism', building on Tronto's theory of 'caring democracy' and advancing notions of collective well-being, psychological support, mutual aid and socio-ecological balance.

Ecological transformation

One of the central theoretical inspirations for radical municipalism is Bookchin's (1987, 2015) 'social ecology', founded on the compelling intuition that human domination of non-human nature is dialectically embroiled with our domination of each other – that the capitalist-colonial plunder and degradation of ecologies is rooted, ultimately, in hierarchical and dominating social relations in all their intersections. Bookchin's related ideas for 'libertarian municipalism' suggest a radical new polity

based on democratically-confederated self-governing eco-socialist bio-regions, in which ecological systems such as watersheds and biomes are the basis for territorial organisation, reconfigured in symbiotic relation with environmental metabolisms. Food and water and other foundational ecosystems are important here. The ‘democratic confederalism’ of the autonomous region of Rojava is an interesting materialisation of these ideas (Knapp et al., 2016), as are the efforts to translate ideas of Latin American water communities to territorially-grounded water remunicipalisations in Catalunya (Planas and Martínez, 2020).

A key concept within social ecology is *metabolism* – connecting with recent scholarship in Marxist political ecology (Moore, 2015) – understood as the mediating infrastructure through which matter from nature is converted into energy for societal organisation and functioning. Such ideas are beginning to influence social movements related to municipalism, with a ‘right to metabolism’ articulated in the name of degrowth and ‘habitability’ (Savini, 2021). Indeed, radical municipalist movements are deeply conscious of their power to reconfigure the shape of human settlements in ecologically reparative ways. In this special issue, Sareen and Waagsaether (2022) evaluate municipalist interventions in Barcelona and Madrid in terms of urban transitions to sustainability – bringing these two fields into conversation for the first time. They find a number of flagship policies – such as *Barcelona en Comú*’s signature ‘Superblock’ masterplanning, creating car-free green micro-neighbourhoods (see also Kussy et al., 2022, this issue), its remunicipalisation of energy services for 100% localised renewable energy (Angel, 2021), and Ahora Madrid’s Low Emission Zone, including electric bus routes – all contributing towards addressing the challenge of transitioning to low-carbon sustainable urban metabolisms. However, such policies

are merely progressive programmes often imitated and initiated the world over by local governments, whether municipalist or not.

What, then, makes radical municipalism distinctive when it comes to urban sustainability transitions? The discourses of degrowth and post-growth – close relations of municipalism – might suggest an answer. There is a ‘scalar gap’, argues Schmid (2023: 2) ‘between the (envisioned) institutionalisation of post-growth’ – deemed to be the national and international regulatory scales – ‘and the spaces in which post-growth transformations are most actively practised and negotiated’ – that is, prefigurative practices in everyday life. Municipalism, here, can act as the hinge and play the role of mediator between community-led experiments and systemic transformation, which remain polarised in the degrowth literature. However, the only contributions to have explored synergies between municipalism and degrowth are Schmid’s (2023) recent assessment, building on Vansintjan’s (2018) sketch of a ‘degrowth municipalism’ (see also Thompson, 2021b). Degrowth is also a major oversight of this special issue – a gap we briefly address here.

In reorienting urban metabolism away from capital’s ‘growth dependencies’, degrowth radically expands the project for urban sustainability transitions from the narrowly technical and low-carbon focus to encompass the entire apparatus of capitalism, understood as a ‘world-ecological’ *system* (Moore, 2015) – not just mode of economic production – that ‘cannibalises’ its own ‘background conditions of possibility’, including political, ecological, racial and social reproduction (Fraser, 2022). If it is the expansionary, propulsive power of capital – embodied in interest-bearing finance and the ‘mute compulsion’ to produce for profit, enforced by fierce market competition (Mau, 2023) – that ultimately catalyses unsustainable resource depletion, ecosystem

degradation and climate breakdown, then the solution lies not simply with transitioning to zero-carbon urban infrastructures, but reorienting the entire socio-ecological-economic apparatus – our *metabolism* – away from growth dependencies towards more circular, regenerative and reparative systems.

First, this means socialising, localising and reconfiguring the capitalist global supply chains that enforce integration into unsustainable, exploitative and extractive petrochemical-fuelled planetary production – for a ‘counter-logistics’, as Minuchin and Maino (2022, this issue) document in Rosario, Argentina, specifically for food. Second, it calls for re-engineering monetary, credit and financial flows away from interest-bearing, debt-based capital, towards alternative circuits based on social and ecological value. Degrowthers and municipalists alike thus see great value in experimentation with alternative currencies, time banking, mutual credit systems, LETS, and Universal Basic Income (UBI) as interstitial and symbiotic transformations of money; indeed, UBI experiments have been initiated at the city scale by various municipalists, such as in Spain (Bua and Davies, 2022, this issue), while UBI Labs are being set up to campaign for city pilots of UBI across the UK and internationally by quasi-municipalist activists (Thompson, 2022). Third, such reconfigurations are rendered by Russell et al. (2022a: 8, this issue) as part of the ‘self-expanding circuit of the commons’ – or, rather, ‘the common’ (for this important distinction see Bianchi, 2022, this issue) – which also includes innovations in labour organisation and land ownership, such as community land trusts and worker-owned cooperatives. The municipalist wager, here: expanding circuits of the common can begin to decouple human metabolism from capitalist growth dependencies.

Conclusions

Through this article we have adopted the idea of radical municipalism as an *apuesta* – a critical hypothesis of systemic change. It is a hypothesis grounded in a politics of proximity which can be approached through a heuristic structured around four dimensions: economic reorganisation, democratisation of political decision-making, feminisation of politics, and ecological transformation. The wave of initiatives that flourished through the 2010s will likely endure as an important reference point for this *apuesta*, even as some begin to falter or fail politically. If the self-defined *ciudades del cambio*¹ had not manifested themselves so successfully in the Spanish 2015 municipal elections, and if they were not coordinated under the leadership of *Barcelona en Comú* to organise the international Fearless Cities gathering in 2017, we would likely not be talking about the radical municipalist hypothesis today.

However, just as the hypothesis neither begins nor ends with electoral projects, so we understand this *apuesta* is not the ‘property’ of particular places, particular initiatives, or particular contexts. To speak of a city as radical municipalist leads us into all kinds of contradictions, category errors, and dead-ends, and from a conceptual perspective serves us poorly. Even referring to specific initiatives (such as *Zagreb je naš*, *Barcelona en Comú* or *Ciudad Futura*) as explicitly *radical municipalist* can be misleading; this is more useful as shorthand for political organising than it is in offering conceptual clarity. Various efforts to map radical municipalism have routinely come up against these challenges, and many hours have been spent sweating over whether we are talking about actors, processes, places, policies, parties, or events.² Ultimately, this challenge rests on the fact that radical municipalism is not a characteristic but a political

proposition, a radical *apuesta* about how the world can be changed.

There are a number of implications for future intellectual work on this radical municipalist *apuesta*. First, we should not restrict ourselves to focusing on the geographical and historical frames typically associated with new municipalism, something like 2014-onwards in southern European (and especially Spanish) contexts. An apparent starting point for such research is the long-history of ‘municipal socialist’ projects, defined by Stromquist (2023) as the efforts by ‘workers to make cities around the globe livable and democratic’. Yet the danger of a category error looms large. We must ward against equating every effort at making a city ‘livable and democratic’ with a radical municipalist politics, and instead look for the conceptual overlaps in experiences that do not ostensibly associate themselves with the language of radical municipalism. For example, Kohn (2003) and Davis (2018: 103) each trace the influences of the ‘houses of the people’ – ‘authentic proletarian cathedrals’ – built by movements across European municipalities in the wake of the Paris Commune, offering an historical analysis of a proto-municipalist politics of proximity, and early experiments in democratising decision-making through new institutions. Extending our line of enquiry out from the definitional boundaries of radical municipalism to explore interconnected movements and experiments that are either ongoing and adjacent to radical municipalism or initiated prior to the new municipalist wave – notably the 1994 Zapatista Uprising in Mexico (Starr et al., 2011) and the ongoing Rojavan revolution in Syria (Knapp et al., 2016) – can help to address the Atlantic-centrism of the concept, helping us to think from the ‘global South-East’ (Robinson, 2016), developing conceptual richness and identifying new points of solidarity along the way.

Many of the concepts we are working with have a long history of development in other

contexts, regardless of differences in discourse. A clear example here would be the parallels with the concept and practice of ‘territory’, explored by Arpini et al. (2022) in this issue for the distinctive strand of South American municipalism. Territory has been defined as ‘space appropriated by a determinate social relation that produces and maintains it through a form of power’ (Fernandes, 2005: 27), and which Zibechi (2003: 26) identified as ‘the most important distinguishing feature of Latin American social movements’. The parallels with discussions about the politics of proximity are at their clearest when we read about ‘work within the territory proposed as the production of new values of solidarity that reconstitute the interpersonal relationships and existential dimensions of people’ and as ‘the production of a new society’ that ‘projects and affirms itself as “non-state sovereignty”’ (Delamata, 2004: 48).

Second, there is both scope and urgency for a deeper reflection on the temporalities of radical municipalism as a theory of systemic transformation. As we deepen our theorisation of the relationship between symbiotic, interstitial and ruptural change (Wright, 2010), we also need to consider what this means for radical municipalism as a strategy that really can move beyond a focus on comparatively local and delimited instances of change. What exactly are the prospects for these different change processes to feed into one another; how do we understand these as non-linear processes; and what time horizon does that put us on in a *linear* sense? If ‘there are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen’, as Lenin is famed to have remarked, how can radical municipalists strategically intervene across these contrasting temporalities? Time structures the different repertoires or moments of municipalist praxis: from the non-linear, historically-cyclical ‘messianic’ visionary time of ruptural protest to the compressed and

disciplining ‘bureaucratic’ temporalities of symbiotic change, to the patient, rhythmic, generative time of prefigurative, interstitial action in everyday life (see Knight and Stewart, 2016). These temporalities override, collide or parallel one another in often contradictory ways. Here, we see temporality and crisis returning to haunt radical municipalist strategy. Is municipalist strategy capable of winning *and* holding power *and* building counter-power in the current conjuncture? This question becomes all the more pressing in the context of ecological crisis. Is there enough linear time to expand degrowth practices through municipalism’s patiently prefigurative and painstakingly participatory processes before more authoritarian responses assert themselves? Can non-linear understandings of change help radical municipalist theory escape this bind?

Third, a critical conjunctural analysis attuned to reading crisis – recently translated from cultural studies into critical urban studies (Leitner et al., 2019) – represents a fruitful avenue for deepening municipalist action-research. One thing these two approaches – radical municipalism and conjuncturalism – share is a political and historical orientation to the present, both seeking, as Leitner and Sheppard (2020: 495) characterise the latter, ‘to intervene in order to achieve progressive ends during moments of conjunctural uncertainty, when hegemony is in question’. The shared approach to transformative social change is to exploit the fissures and fractures in hegemonic settlements – to unravel their seams through political struggle by proactively intervening at critical junctures and crisis-points; turning crisis into opportunity. That conjunctural crises tend to crystallise at the urban, as a mediating scale – condensing in cities to become manifest and tangible in urban everyday life – is one source of municipalist struggle (Bayırbağ et al., 2017). Yet radical municipalism is not simply reaction; it is

speculative and coordinated action – an implicitly conjunctural intervention taking risks to unsettle historical – and human – settlements. The question remains how conjunctural action-research with municipalist movements might inform municipalist strategy as action unfolds on the ground, as conjunctural opportunities for hegemonic intervention present themselves. Likewise, municipalist praxis has much to teach this critical strand of urban studies now turning its attention to conjuncturalism as a politically-engaged method.

Fourth, just as conjunctural analysis is being adopted to reframe inter-urban global-comparative research (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020), so too can it provide a methodological framing, alongside more familiar comparative approaches in urban studies (Robinson, 2016), for the urgent task of comparing municipalist cases across difference. Despite the boundary-pushing and ‘binary-busting’ (Beveridge and Naumann, 2023) nature of radical municipalist theory, the articles in this special issue tread fairly familiar methodological ground, mostly presenting a single case study of a contemporary experiment to illuminate different features of the field. Joubert’s (2022) is the only case study of historical practice in this issue, a gap for future research to explore. A third of the papers, however, compare two distinct cases – one compares four (Béal et al., 2023) – to begin to tease out differences and generate new theory (Bianchi, 2022; Bua and Davies, 2022; Milan, 2022; Sareen and Waagsaether, 2022; Sarnow and Tiedermann, 2022; Toro and Orozco, 2023). Nonetheless, *connections* between cases remain relatively under-analysed in relation to the policy mobilities, assemblage and mobile urbanism methodologies of urban studies (Leitner et al., 2019) – a major oversight of this special issue, especially considering municipalism’s transnationalism and translocal movement-building. There is

further scope, too, to learn from – and contribute to – a global urban-comparative methodological approach for ‘genetic’ as well as ‘generative’ comparison (Robinson, 2016).

Fifth, municipalist research is well-placed to contribute to the debate over studying ‘ordinary’ rather than ‘global’ or paradigmatic cities, by attending closely to small towns and cities and peripheral places ‘off the map’ of the usual suspects beloved of critical urban scholars (Beveridge and Naumann, 2023). As a collective, we remain guilty of platforming the global exemplars of Barcelona, Naples and Zagreb – each appearing more than their fair share in this special issue – although we tried our best to find unusual, understudied examples of municipalist experimentation. The range of cases compiled here reflects the biases in the framing of our call for papers and the interests of municipalist researchers, as much as it does the why, where and how discourses are generated and travel to shape the field of practice itself – a geography still dominated by South America and southern Europe, with Africa, Asia and North America conspicuously underrepresented and not represented here at all.

If radical municipalist strategy is to prove truly capable of contending with the compounding crises of the Capitalocene, the deeply uneven geographical development of municipalism desperately requires redress, in both theory and practice. But this is not the only polarisation that hinders its political potential. As the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, divisions and contradictions abound: between the public and the common (Bianchi, 2022; Russell et al., 2022); between direct and representative democracy (van Outryve d’Ydewalle, 2022); between spontaneous grassroots organisation and institutionalised structures (Pinto et al., 2022); between innovating participatory

processes within the green-left and building cross-class coalitions and counter-hegemonic visions (Béal et al., 2023); between green growth and degrowth (Sareen and Waagsaether, 2022), between urban centrality and peripheral urbanisation (Toro and Orozco, 2023); between territory regulated as state space and territory conceived as non-state self-government (Arpini et al., 2022); between embodying the slow time of feminist prefigurative practices and mastering the fast time of masculinist grammars, turned against hostile forces (Sarnow and Tiedermann, 2022); between dealing with the path-dependencies of history, utopian and dystopian, and engaging in future-oriented movement-building (Milan, 2022); between overhauling the state machinery and leveraging local government to deliver policy programmes (Bua and Davies, 2022); between transforming the state form through rupture and prefiguring new state forms through interstitial experimentation and symbiotic hacking (Joubert, 2022; Thorpe and Morgan, 2022); between reconfiguring capitalist supply chains and developing autonomous counter-logistics (Minuchin and Maino, 2022); between care as an economic sector for productivity and care as an ethics for reimagining the city (Kussy et al., 2022). So it seems that just as municipalists work to prise open the cracks in capitalism, so too do fissures and fault lines appear in radical municipalist strategy itself – a hypothesis just as challenged by the intersectional contradictions of colonial capitalism and the patriarchal nation-state as it is poised to sublimate them.

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Notes

1. The *Atlas del Cambio* (<http://ciudadesdelcambio.org/>) remains a useful resource that attempted to catalogue specifically *radical municipalist* policies, implemented between 2015 and 2019, in Spanish cities that defined themselves as *ciudades del cambio* – cities of change.
2. These include the aforementioned *Atlas del Cambio* (<http://ciudadesdelcambio.org/>), the UrbanAlternatives map (<https://urbanalternatives.org/>), the Fearless City map (<https://fearlesscities.com/en/map>), mapping done by the European Municipalist Network (<https://municipalisteurope.org/mapping/>), and the Atlas of Utopias (<https://transformativecities.org/atlas-of-utopias/>) among others.

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