



RECOMS Winter School—ONLINE
1-9 February, 2021

CREATING ALTERNATIVE URBAN IMAGINARIES
FROM IDEAS TO PRACTICES AND BACK

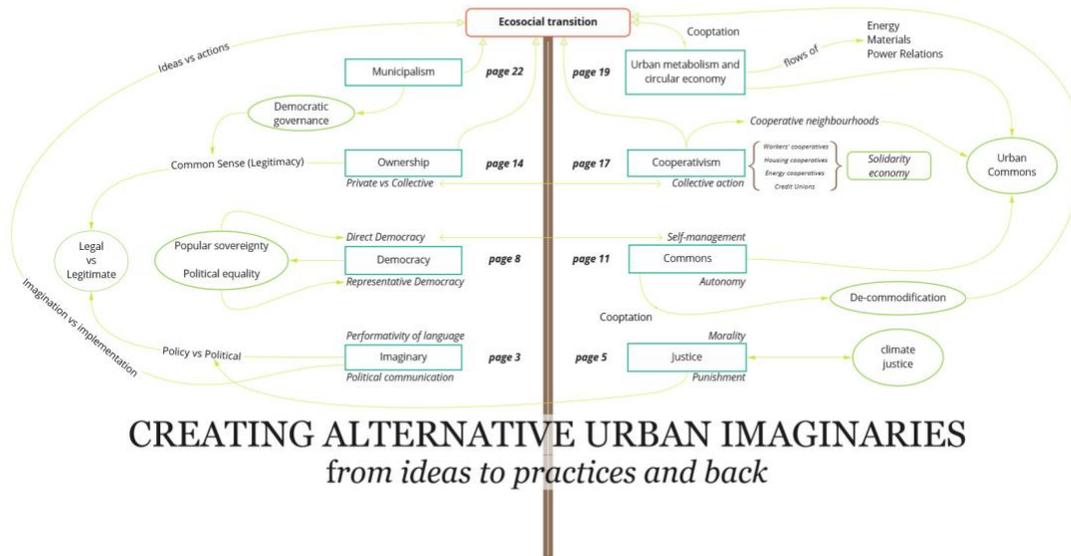
Booklet

This booklet introduces the main concepts of the RECOMS doctoral school on “Creating Alternative Urban Imaginaries”. During the lectures and workshops of the school participants will explore the dialectical relation between knowledge creation in social sciences, the dissemination of that knowledge, and the ways in which this affects the materiality of daily life, with a particular focus on urban settings. Or more simply, how ideas shape practices, and vice versa. The original plan was to hold the school in Barcelona, a particularly representative city concerning issues of participatory democracy, municipalism and urban social movements. While we are saddened we cannot be there together in person, we are happy that all of our speakers can share with us the ways that they actively engage in this politically-rich city. As we learn how they are working from different positionalities - as activists, members of cooperatives, scholars, etc. - to affect transformative change, we will gain a deep understanding of theory that underpins their practices. Whether they are editors of a magazine, advisors to public administrations, members of a housing cooperative, or volunteers in an immigration centre, every one of these speakers is working towards making a fair and socially thriving urban environment not only imaginable, but actual.

The content of the school will focus on the communal character of public spaces in a city, different forms of democratic governance, how cooperativism can shape new understandings of ownership, and how the transformative power of imagination can change the way we coordinate our interdependent lives. In particular, we will take an in-depth look at housing struggles, solidarity economies, social movements and political organisations in Barcelona. In preparing the school, we aimed at inviting people whose backgrounds were not exclusively academic. This is not to diminish the relevance of theoretical investigation, but rather to acknowledge the efforts of those who try to keep their feet in both worlds: the world of thought and the world of action. In this way, the doctoral school focuses on the dynamics that allow knowledge production to reverberate beyond the strict borders of contemporary academia.

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CREATING ALTERNATIVE URBAN IMAGINARIES *from ideas to practices and back*

Instead of overwhelming the participants with a long list of references and reading materials, we - Sergio, Stephen, Rubén and Zhanna - prepared a concise vocabulary of the essential concepts for the doctoral school. After brainstorming among ourselves, with Shared Assets and with all the speakers (and having collected an encyclopedic number of terms!), we have selected the most pertinent ones for the aim of the school: **imaginary, justice, democracy, commons, ownership, cooperativism, urban metabolism and municipalism**. Despite commonplace usage, all of these concepts can be approached from different angles: they can be used to explain different ideas, and are open to various interpretations. Keeping in mind the participants’ great diversity of backgrounds, the process of writing the booklet has been indeed a harder task than anticipated. However, a variety of our professional and personal experiences will surely lead to great discussion. In the texts, you will see questions that are meant to stimulate the thinking process, and in line with that the overall goal of this booklet is to create a space of exchange rather than a universal and exhaustive text corpus of the concepts. Now we are handing it over with the hope that by the beginning of the doctoral school there will be a somewhat shared understanding of the main tenets of the process of “Creating Alternative Urban Imaginaries”.

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IMAGINARY

Rubén Vezzoni Vicente

The imaginary is the content, or the result, of the imagination. Contrary to perception, which depicts reality in the presence of it, imagination is the process of thinking about realities that do not exist in the place where or the time when imagination is taking place. Pre-enlightenment philosophers in the XVII century such as Hobbes, Spinoza or Descartes understood imagination as a stream of consciousness without any real value attached to it. The Age of Reason that started in the XVIII century changed this idea. Particularly in Kant we find a new understanding of the role of imagination, as a process of synthesis of what we perceive in the real world. This definition is the origin of the contemporary understanding of imagination: a human gift which has the power to reconstruct and influence real events.

But how can imaginaries, which are intangible expressions of one's thoughts, practically change reality? The answer, perhaps a bit unrefined but nonetheless representative, is that the imagined is connected to the real through language. Linguistic communication does so by making a personal thought into a common domain. In the next paragraphs, the functioning of language as a medium between ideas and practice is articulated into three components: the performativity of language, reflexivity, and political communication.

Firstly, it is useful to think of language beyond its descriptive capacity. Not only can a speech describe an event, but it can also determine by its very existence the outcome of such event. This is what from the '50s became known as the performativity of language. J. Austin, when introducing the concept, defined performative utterances as equivalents of action, in which the "thing" is done rather than described. An example can clarify this notion. A descriptive sentence would be: "this cat is called Lid". However, the slightly different sentence "I name this cat Lid" pronounced in the right circumstances (for instance in front of a veterinary when the kitten is visiting the clinic for the first time) is actually performing an action with concrete consequences. More recently, the performativity of language has been a key concept in philosophical currents such as post-structuralism (e.g. in Derrida's work) or sociological schools of thought like feminist theories¹.

Secondly, modern insights from philosophy of science popularized the notion of reflexivity in the social domain. Reflexivity is the idea that social structures and agents (i.e. individuals) are in a circular causal relationship. Contrary to the lab setting of empiricist sciences, in social studies the observations of

¹ Particularly relevant for the feminist debate is what Butler calls gender performativity – or the theory of gender as a social construction.

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the observer influence the observed. The ideas and theories of social scientist have an impact on the behaviour of the individuals participating in the study. In economics, for instance, reflexivity and the related notion of self-fulfilling prophecies are nowadays well-known concepts thanks to the work, among others, of George Soros² (and Karl Popper). The reflexivity of language, coupled with the performativity of speech, demonstrates the pragmatic power of imaginaries. Imagination is real action. Therefore, if we accept the holistic assumption that society is more than the sum of atomistic individuals, imagination represents the driving force of social change. The spread of new imaginaries can transform norms, beliefs, and other social institutions.

Thirdly, it follows that language can be used for political communication, which is the strategic usage of speech for influencing public opinion (i.e. see common sense in the “Ownership” section of this booklet) and inspire social actions. Similarly to the difference between performative and descriptive language, political communication is not the same as policy speech. Policy defines the method through which an already defined governance body decides to reach a set goal. The political, on the contrary, is the destructive process of construction of new governance bodies. It springs from the exercise of pondering and practising alternative possible scenarios. It is a space of debate, litigation, and antagonism. In radical terms, the political emancipates from conservative habits, and allows imagining what was previously not allowed to be imagined. As suggested in Žižek (2013), it is the art of demanding the impossible. While policy jargon strengthens the status quo, political language shakes its foundations.

In order to move from abstract imagination to concrete action, new imaginaries need to struggle for hegemonic relevance in society. This is often a long process, which we have tried to explore by identifying the main components of language as a driver of imaginative power – in its performative, reflexive and political elements. But what determines if a specific imaginary is to be successful or to decay soon? Why certain ideas are strongly felt only in certain places or certain times? How can we cultivate our political imagination? These and more questions still need to be answered in the exploration of social imaginaries.

Further readings:

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: University Press. [Link to pdf](#)

² The filthy rich financial investor George Soros is also the founder of INET (Institute for New Economic Thinking), the most influential heterodox economics institute.

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Butler, J. (2004). Undoing Gender. Routledge. [Link to pdf](#)

Lawson, T. (2013). Soros' Theory of Reflexivity: A Critical Comment. *Revue de Philosophie Économique*, 14(1), 29–48. [Link to pdf](#)

Žižek, S. (2013). Demanding the Impossible. Polity Press. [Link to a review of the book](#)

Other References:

Erik Swyngedouw on the difference between Politics and The Political – [link to the video](#)

Imagination, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 22 Jan 2019 – [link to the encyclopaedia](#)

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JUSTICE AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

Zhanna Baimukhamedova

In the medieval ages, there was this dream of the land of plenty—Cockaigne. There, one would believe, no hunger existed and no unsatisfied desire would go on for long. In a peculiar manner, the land of plenty did not just tend to bodily needs: by making sure that everyone had equal access to the same goods and services regardless of their origin or trade, this magical land rendered social strata—and privileges that come along with them—obsolete. A king would be on the same footing as a peasant, farming amounted to the same prestige as deeds of a noble knight, and a milkmaid, despite her gender and economic stance, enjoyed the same sort of freedom, reverence, and access as the most accomplished swordsman. In such a land, it seems, the concept of justice would never take hold for the fact that justice only then comes in question when there is a staggering lack thereof. But what is justice exactly?

In a nutshell, justice refers to legitimizing the outcome of a given process: based on time- and place-specific criteria, it scrutinizes the degree of deserving a certain result with regard to the actions of an individual. Especially in the Western religious and philosophical thought, the notion of justice is tightly connected with the concept of meritocracy—a belief that everyone deserves the outcome they receive based on the amount of labor, dedication, and perseverance put into it. However, there is one major distinction: justice does not necessarily assume a world of fairness. It is hard to argue that a starting position decides much of what one may achieve in life. For instance, when regarding one’s economic opportunities, there are touted examples of making it from shreds to riches, but as plentiful there are instances of such insurmountable poverty traps when not just people themselves but also their late descendants are bound to debt from which they can never recover³.

Justice is strongly dependent on moral codes and values. Meritocracy is one example of justice closely related with capitalist values of individualism and competition. However, by contending to the fact that life circumstances vary for each person hence the outcomes of their actions differ excessively, justice specifically aims at neutralizing the effects of such inequalities. As there are notions of “good” and “bad,” justice is an inherently moral judgment. By the same token, justice is time- and place-bound: it refers to the norms and predispositions of certain people in certain places in certain periods of time. In this regard, justice is a supposedly inseparable component of legitimacy—and, by extension, legality. Legitimacy, as defined in the piece on “Ownership,” is the recognition and acceptance of the set of rules and norms of a

³ For example, debt bondage ensures that a person (and in some cases their offspring) is obliged to work for a creditor often under conditions that presuppose impossibility of ever repaying the debt. Not exactly a form of slavery, debt bondage nonetheless forces a person into labor that has no prospects of economic and social advancement.

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polity (e.g. the government), which structure both individual lives and collective action. Legality, on the other hand, in its plainest form refers to the conformity with laws. Justitia, the goddess of justice who embellishes many a law court around the world, is usually portrayed with a blindfold to signify her impartial judgment. However, the notion of justice often gets lost in the steps that separate the transformation of a legitimate claim into a legal framework.

There have been attempts to find absolutes of good and evil that encompass all time, geography, and peoples. One example could be various religious beliefs where a deity or several are believed to transcend human judgment and, by extension, boundaries of justice. Since their actions do not beget a negative judgment, they are also exempt from another important component of the concept of justice: punishment. Punishment and reward are sides of the same coin and are thought of as a means to assure, motivate, and promote a certain kind of behavior—by means of either negative or positive reinforcement, or manifold combinations of both. Punishment is often evoked in legal or contractual disputes where inability or unwillingness to adhere to the word of a law or an agreement leads to a trial and possible penalty. However, punishment does not reside exclusively within the realm of institutionalized arrangements—in fact, each person both historically and in the course of one's life is a subject to various kinds of punishments (as well as rewards) whose primary alleged role is that of education.

Climate justice

But does the concept of justice apply only to humans? Like the overwhelming majority of other societal regulations, justice is a product of human cerebral ingenuity and is mostly applicable to human or humanity-related concerns. However, there is a kind of justice that encompasses more than just human affairs, and that is climate justice. Climate justice addresses issues such as the effects of climate change from a perspective of the interconnectedness of all creatures and processes on the planet. It tries to establish the causality of certain phenomena and assess their effects from a moral and, increasingly more often, legal standpoint. Unlike environmental justice with its main focus on sources and “destinations” of pollution which started in the 1970s in the U.S., climate justice came later as a more comprehensive movement that included classic environmental justice concerns and movements, but expanded the scope to include more-than-humans, and put emphasis on climate change.

One of the main concerns of climate justice is the unequal distribution of “winners” and “losers” of globalization and the free market: whereas some countries or groups of people profit lavishly, some other countries, peoples, regions, and non-human beings might have to bear many costs for and adverse effects of these gains. On a community level, such negative effects are further disproportionately spread between those who have relatively more power and those who are marginalized because of their social

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status, gender, age, ethnicity, etc. In effect, climate justice postulates that the existence of such stark inequalities is proof that environmental crises, their causes, and effects are not simply matters of the natural world—they are products of unequal distribution of power, lack of proactive democratic politics, insatiable avarice of corporations, and the undying paradigm of endless, exponential growth, lauded as the only way to pull people out of poverty and into the promised land of Cockaigne.

Questions for discussion:

- What constitutes a just society? If we think of justice as a continuum, have there been societies/groups of people who were closer to the ideal of justice?
- Speaking of meritocracy and deserving one's lot, is it necessarily connected to the capitalist values?
- What is the utility of punishment? Can it be avoided or there are cases when it is completely indispensable?
- Can you think of a case from your country/study region that exemplifies a case of climate injustice? Are there any initiatives to combat it? Is there media coverage/international organizations that deal with the issue?

Further readings:

Hardt, M. (2011) For Love or Money. *Cultural Anthropology*, 26:4, 676-682

Honneth, A. (1995) *Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Patel, R., Moore, J. (2017) *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press

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Shiva, V. (2000) *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press

Skinner, B.F. (1971) *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. New York: Bantam Books

Videos:

Chris Hedges, What Greed has Done—[YouTube](#)

Rutger Bregman, Poverty isn't a Lack of Character; It's Lack of Cash—[YouTube](#)

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DEMOCRACY

Stephen Leitheiser

The essence of democracy is people meeting as equals to decide how they want to live together.

The roots of the word go back to ancient Greece, where *dēmokratīā* roughly meant “rule by the people”. For the Greeks, democracy indicated an equal sharing of power (*kratos*) among members of the political community (the *dēmos*, which was, of course, exclusive of slaves, women, and foreigners). *Dēmokratīā* can be traced back to Greece in ca. 500 BCE, but more recent archaeological studies have provided evidence that the word *dēmos*, and cultures and practices based on popular self-government, have much older origins in the lands that are today Syria, Iraq and Iran. Suffice to say, the democratic ideal of people coming together as equals to decide how they want to live together has been around for some time.

Throughout this long history there have been many disagreements about what practices, processes, and institutions make governance democratic. These disputes continue today. But one thing remains fairly certain: democracy occupies a strong foothold in the political imagination of peoples all over the globe. At present, communities ranging from the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea, to the Kingdom of Norway, to the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, to Rojava, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, all profess to be organized around democratic principles. This vast diversity of democratic thought and practice (or in some cases, misleading propaganda that aims to cloak anti-democratic regimes) makes understanding and defining the nature of democracy a difficult task.

Democracy is a contested and protean concept. It is a horizon, as Mark Purcell puts it - an ideal that is always approached, but it is never finally reached.⁴ There is no fixed end state; democracy is an opening statement for actively participating in self-governance, and in becoming democratic.

In general, the disagreements in democratic theory and practice can be summarized into disputes over who exactly constitutes the people that participate in governing, and how this process of participation is structured. The democratic creed of self-governance has cast a long shadow over institutions of government that claim to embody it. Beginning with the Haitian Revolution against the French in the late 18th century, uprisings and struggles in the name of democracy have continuously taken

⁴ Purcell M (2013) *The Down-Deep Delight of Democracy*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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place in the context of societies which already profess themselves to be democracies. The who and the how of democracy are subject to constant change.

Although concretely defining a mutable concept like democracy is a difficult task that, at best, can capture a partial snapshot of meaning, we will attempt to do so here with two principles: popular sovereignty and political equality. Two examples - representative democracy and direct democracy - may make this more clear.

Popular sovereignty is the capacity for “the people”, or more accurately the designated members of the political community (e.g. children are normally excluded), to participate in determining how power is exercised and who exercises it. For popular sovereignty to be achieved, people who are subjected to relationships of governance need to have ongoing opportunities to (re)shape governance structures and meaningfully participate in political decisions that affect them.

Political equality refers to the capacities of influence that each member of the political community has to exercise over decisions and processes of governance. For the ideal of political equality to be achieved, the capacities to exert influence should be identical among all members of the political community. In practice, however, political equality often translates into similar rather than identical capacities to exert influence.

Representative democracy is when some members of the political community stand in for others in deliberation, negotiation, and authoritative decision making. It is most commonly associated with territorially-bounded nation states that have periodic competitive elections for positions of executive and legislative authorities. The degree to which this is actually representative and democratic has been historically and geographically variegated.

At its best, representative democracy can allow for the articulation of the needs and interests of the people through open and pluralistic deliberation, lay the groundwork for economic and social security, and facilitate empowerment and active participation of citizens in politics. At its worst, it can become a mere camouflage for a competitive oligarchy in which elite groups jockey for control. Since this risk is ever present, representative democracy is dependent on a robust civil society, a reasonable degree of economic equality, and a strong, critical and free news media.

Although they may not be directly involved in the practice of governance, the people are said to have popular sovereignty in representative democracy through their capacity to hold leadership to account with regular elections. Political equality is said to be achieved in representative democracy through civil rights and liberties, which today include universal suffrage for citizens over a certain age.

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Nations with a great deal of economic inequality, like the United States of America, may be seen by some to have political equality “on paper” only, as private interests can exert political influence vastly beyond that of normal citizens.

Direct democracy is generally understood as the unmediated participation of the people in political decision making and governance. Like representative democracy, it can be direct and democratic to varying degrees. At its most radical, direct democracy is the devolution (or reclamation) of resources and political authority to direct citizen control. Examples range from grassroots movements based on the horizontal consensus politics of general assemblies and working groups, like those found in the Occupy Wall Street movement, to public hearings and town hall meetings at the municipal level, to various forms of participatory budgeting in which citizens are directly involved in the allocation of public money. In less radical forms, direct democracy can also be understood as plebiscitary elections, in which citizens are given the chance to vote in referendums on particular questions. These are typically binary, Yes/No, of which the Swiss referendum system, or Brexit are famous examples. In the latter case of majority rules, much of the population may be subject to decisions which they fiercely disagree.

Popular sovereignty is much more self-explanatory in direct democracy than in representative democracy. More radical notions of direct democracy, like those found in Occupy Wall Street, strive for a deeply radical practice of political equality, in which processes are designed to, as much as possible, give each voice the same opportunity to exert influence.

Further reading and viewing:

What is Democracy? (2018), film by Astra Taylor - [YouTube](#) or email Stephen (srleitheiser@protonmail.com) for mp4

Winona LaDuke - Indigenous Democracy and Justice Systems - [YouTube](#)

James Tully - What are the biggest challenges democracy is facing today? - [YouTube](#)

The Life and Death of Democracy (2009), book by John Keane

Earth Democracy (2005), book by Vandana Shiva

The Deep Down Delight of Democracy (2013), book by Mark Purcell

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Living Under Post-Democracy (2020), book by Caleb R. Miller

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THE COMMONS

Sergio Ruiz Cayuela

The commons is a concept originally used in England during the Middle Ages to designate shared areas (mostly woods and pasture lands) that people could access and self-manage to get basic resources such as firewood, foraged food or grazing for their cattle. In a mostly rural society, peasants were exploited by landowners and relied on the commons for survival. The concept was popularised in academia in the late 20th century by a group of scholars (that we will call the 'institutionalists') who saw many similarities between the ways in which communities all over the world interacted with their environments and the commons from feudal England. Their aim was to find efficient and sustainable ways of managing natural resources. Elinor Ostrom, who was the most prominent figure of this current, dismantled liberal myths and prejudices by presenting the commons as a viable property regime that should be favoured depending on the level of rivalry of a good and the difficulty of excluding potential beneficiaries. She believed that the main drivers of success for commons were its internal design principles, namely the socio-ecological attributes that would lead to the sustainable management of a specific resource by a community.

The turn of the century saw an upsurge of the alter-globalisation movement, which took a critical stance to the 'institutionalist' perspective of the commons. George Caffentzis, for example, highlighted the naive and apolitical vision of the world mobilised by Ostrom, who mostly overlooked exogenous power relations and political conflicts. Caffentzis pointed toward the importance of power relations and external interactions (between commons, institutions and private companies) as the main factor determining the ability of the commons to sustain themselves. During this time, the focus shifted from commons as resources to 'commoning' as a practice. Therefore, commons were not just seen as a potentially efficient management form, but as a political project antagonist to the logic of capital. In the last years, authors like Massimo de Angelis and Amanda Huron have understood that the tension between the 'institutionalist' and the 'alter-globalisationist' approaches needs a productive articulation in order to better understand the survival and expansion of the commons.

When envisioning post-capitalist imaginaries, commons need to be devised as forms of social organisation opposed to capital and the state. Capital is characterised by the exploitation to differing degrees of nature as raw materials, workers in the workplace, women in the household, and all the non-elites in general. This is legitimised by the liberal laws of the market, which portray people as individuals moved by the maximisation of economic profit, and normalise values such as individualism, competition and greed. The commons oppose this logic and mobilise cooperation, solidarity and mutualism as core values, which in turn affect the way we relate to each other and the environment. The development of

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capitalism advanced in parallel with the creation of a new institutional arrangement, that of the nation-state. The nation-state is here understood as a centralised accumulation of political power which has complete sovereignty and the monopoly of violence over a territory. The state is supposed to protect its citizens and act in their interests, but the last centuries have shown us that, whether in liberal democracies or in authoritarian political settings, it often ends up defending the interests of the elites and oppressing the majority of the population (to varying degrees of course!). The commons are antagonistic to centralisation, power accumulation and are therefore wary of representative forms of democracy. Regardless of the specific arrangements of particular commons, power always flows from the bottom-up, which means that all commoners have power to directly affect the management of the commons. In short, the commons are based on practices of direct democracy, horizontality, assemblarism and consensus decision-making.

Although they are grounded on antagonist core values, the commons, capital and the state currently coexist and depend on each other for their reproduction. Let's take the example of a community garden organised as a commons. Commoners will need tools to work the soil. Those tools have probably been produced in capitalist factories, and they need to be purchased according to their exchange value (an arbitrary quantification based on the maximisation of price according to market laws). Also, even if things go well and the garden is productive, it might not be enough to fulfill the basic needs of the commoners involved (their social reproduction). They will probably need to complement their commoning activities with waged work for a capitalist enterprise. Moreover, the land where the community garden is based might be public, or in other words, managed and owned by the state. Therefore, commoners can either squat (risking eviction which would undermine their garden), or negotiate the use of the land accepting the regulations and rules imposed by the state (or its representative institutions).

All these relationships of dependency can lead to processes of cooptation, meaning the instrumental use of the commons by the state or private actors in order to reproduce themselves. Going back to the case of the community garden, landowners and developers could see it as an opportunity to raise rents of surrounding properties, develop new commercial ventures and, in short, make profit. This would in turn spark a process of gentrification, displacing the commoners who were involved in the garden to less desirable places to live. Cooptation can also be exercised by the state. In fact, in recent years examples abound. The austerity policies implemented by many countries after the 2008 crisis supposed a progressive retreat of the state from the provision of basic services to the population, which were covered by communities self-organising. In the UK, for example, it has become a common picture to see public libraries run by local communities on a voluntary basis. Thus, if the commons are to survive, expand, and become emancipatory post-capitalist alternatives, they need to push for autonomy.

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Autonomy is a relational and gradual characteristic which indicates the capacity of self-management of a given system. In other words, the more autonomy that a commons has, the less dependent it will be of external inputs. The issue of autonomy opens up another important discussion, that of scale. As we have seen in the case of the community garden, it is almost impossible for a specific commons to have a high degree of autonomy (we need tools, land, wages, ...). However, if several commons cooperate with each other and organise their interactions following commoning values and practices - what Massimo De Angelis calls 'commons ecologies' - it is much easier to gain a certain degree of autonomy. What if the members of the community garden decide to expand their project and include a community kitchen? The kitchen will be able to use the produce from the garden, and gardeners will be able to get their food from the community kitchen, thus reducing their dependency on capitalist supermarkets and restaurants, or social services managed by the state. And what if they decided to add a tool recycling workshop and other projects to the newly formed commons ecology? In conclusion, for commons to become viable alternatives able to resist cooptation and to present ways for emancipating from capital and the state, a greater interaction among commons is needed that allows greater autonomy.

Box: the urban commons

In the current neoliberal period, with its focus on globalisation, financial markets and more urban development; the locus of resistance to capital has shifted from factories to cities. Therefore, there has been a lot of interest in trying to determine if and how the urban commons might be different from commons in rural or peri-urban areas. Amanda Huron provides a very convincing explanation when she points towards two main differential traits of the urban commons. First, cities are characterised by high density of population and economic activities, which makes competition for space fierce. Therefore, the urban commons find it particularly difficult to access land or other resources, as in cities everything is seen as a potential investment and nothing is left idle. Second, the urban commons are defined by the collective work of people with few things in common. In smaller towns or rural areas, commoners usually know each other (or at least share a common identity or sense of belonging to a place) before being involved in commoning activities. In the urban context, part of the commoning process is actually creating a community itself. Thus, Huron characterises commoning processes in urban environments as "working with strangers in saturated space".

Want to know more?

George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici - [Commons against and beyond capitalism](#) (2014)

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Amanda Huron - [Working with strangers in saturated space: Reclaiming and maintaining the urban commons](#) (2015)

Massimo de Angelis - [Omnia Sunt Communia: On the commons and the transformation to postcapitalism](#) (2017)

Elinor Ostrom - [Governing the Commons](#) (1990)

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OWNERSHIP

Rubén Vezzoni Vicente

“Ownership” is often used and abused without a clear understanding of its meaning. In its plainest form, ownership is the state of being an owner – but the owner of what? In most cases, the owned is an inanimate object, such as a book, a real estate or even the result of intangible work such as intellectual property. The owner benefits of its possession exclusively and fully or, put into negative terms, the owner can “exclude others from the use or enjoyment of one's possession without one’s consent” (Encyclopaedia Britannica: Ownership). It is a tacit social agreement between the owner and everyone else that the owner has rights to the benefits of that which is owned.

This definition, however, falls short in considering ownership of living beings and the relations with them⁵. Let’s take the example of animals, such as pets. Surely the owner can decide at any time on behalf of its companion animal, but in observance with due regard to the norms that protect animal welfare. The same applies to land and any other property with ecosystemic relevance. Society defines the boundaries of ownership in assuring exclusive enjoyment but also in prescribing a limit to the liberties of the owner. And not only that. Social norms also define the situations in which the owner is to be considered responsible for the actions of the owned. Continuing with the example of the pet, if an unleashed dog bumps into a parked motorbike and makes it fall, the animal's owner will surely have learnt a lesson about the purpose of leashes for the significant compensation paid to the owner of the motorbike. In these cases, ownership resonates more with concepts like stewardship, responsibility and custody rather than mere possession of something.

The rules of ownership emerge from an ever-changing process, according to the fluctuations of what can be called “common sense” (from the literal translation of Gramsci’s *senso comune*, as the set of heterogeneous beliefs and narratives held – or assumed to be held – by the mass of the population, that shape what is taken to be no more than simple reality). An example? It was not long ago that slavery, namely ownership exerted over other human beings, was part of common sense in the vast majority of societies. This type of ownership was not only legal, in the sense of recognised and enforced by law, but also legitimate, as one of the many intrinsic aspects of everyday material life.

Legitimacy, in political philosophy, is the recognition and acceptance of the set of rules and norms of a polity (e.g. the government), which structure both individual lives and collective action. This is, even

⁵ That is, what or whom we consider a being with own agency and capabilities to act upon own wishes. Those deprived of agency are usually considered objects.

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more than legality, what sets the parameters of what can be owned and in which form. The end of institutionalized slavery, for example, did not result in about the absolute disappearance of the exploitation of human beings through ownership rights. According to several authors in sociology and political economy⁶, the spreading of capitalism in liberal democracies favoured the accumulation of private property rights exerted over productive assets. This process meant a change of ownership, perhaps subtle, over the lives of the emerging working class. The masses of people migrating from the countryside, where their means of subsistence were determined by the owner of the land⁷, had now to depend on waged salaries on which they had little or no influence. The livelihood of the urban masses depended upon the share of income which the owner, the capitalist, rather arbitrarily decided to hand back to those accountable in the first place for the production surplus. In the words of the ingenious French intellectual Proudhon (1840): property is theft which allows the alienation from the product of one's labour.

While for the current common sense private property may seem indisputable, the new frontiers of the concept of ownership are defined by the imaginative power of those who question the legitimacy of individual possession as (i) absolute and (ii) inalienable. In the following paragraphs, we are going to unpack these two components.

(i) We have seen that the predominance of societal norms restricts the absolute power of owners. In a hierarchical composition of causal relationships, the owned is controlled by the owner, whose agency in turn is moulded and restricted by society. For example, in the *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt explains how private property fulfilled quite a different purpose in ancient Greece. Private land did not bear the same production value modern society assigns to it. Being a landowner, or the owner of one's house, was instead the necessary condition for partaking in the political life of the polis. And while private property was of utmost importance, citizens were obliged by law to harvest and consume in common the product of the land, regardless of individual ownership rights. This and other historical differences in the meaning of ownership highlight the role of collective norms in determining matters of possession and stewardship. In our rapidly changing society, with the widespread of information technology, the natural catastrophe at our doorstep, and the new promised land of biotech innovation – what new meanings will the term private property assume?

(ii) On the premises of point (i), ownership is not an immutable concept. As in the example of slavery or the early proletariat, it evolves according to the transformations happening in society.

⁶ See Marx, Weber, Hobsbawm, Galbraith, K. Polanji, Braudel, and so on.

⁷ The land was either private property owned by a landlord or a communal area managed through collective agreements; or, most often, a combination of the two.

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According to a materialist conception of history, private ownership as we know it is the result of the social forces that, at least for the last two centuries, have imposed capitalism as the predominant form of material living. Private ownership is also among the foundational principles of the liberal ideology. However, the legitimacy of the concept can, and perhaps should, be disputed. But what are the already available alternatives to private property? For example, unused objects can be donated or shared, e.g. kids' clothes. Facilities which are only temporarily used can be owned in common, e.g. washing machines or work tools like drills. Places that are not taken care of can be appropriated, e.g. one in six properties in Europe is vacant (FEANTSA report 2016) – remember these figures next time someone talks about homelessness and unaffordable rent prices. In all these cases, and especially when private property is a form of speculation over scarcity rather than a form of use, practice shows the inefficiencies of individual ownership in that it leads to degradation, misuse and neglect of the ideals of responsibility and stewardship.

This is not to say that private ownership is meaningless, as for historical reasons it can be considered a crucial means toward self-determination. However, the ideological all-out defence of private property by the rule of law, also in the cases outlined above, does not always resonate with what a pragmatic approach would suggest being optimal. On the basis of this analysis, the malleable concept of ownership is open to adjustments by changes in what is deemed to be legitimate.

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COOPERATIVISM AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

Sergio Ruiz Cayuela

The cooperativist movement emerged at the beginning of the 19th century under the influence of two major historic events. First, the French Revolution in 1789 brought about ideas of progress and freedom that rapidly spread around Europe. Second, the Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom, which saw the consolidation of capitalism as the hegemonic system of production, and the factory as the locus of workers' exploitation and resistance. In this context, Robert Owen developed a pre-Marxist critique of capital and advocated for a political third way. The first way was further consolidation of capitalism, which the second way opposed by pushing for a revolutionary seizure of the state to implement centralised socialism. Owen, instead, theorised and organised an anti-capitalist resistance based on worker cooperativism and community distributism. Against the concentration of property in the hands of the elites, he proposed a society of owners: a network of autonomous cooperative nodes in which the workers could collectively define their life conditions.

These ideas progressively gained ground in England, and culminated in the constitution of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844. Rochdale was the first successful consumers' cooperative, and it was guided by ideas of social and economic autonomy, solidarity, democracy and equity. It became influential because of its political agenda, which led to the constitution of the [seven cooperative principles](#), that are still relevant today. The seven cooperative principles guide the actions of cooperatives worldwide and constitute the ground on which the social and solidarity economies are built. By looking at the principles, we understand that cooperativism is not only an economic movement promoting the spread of cooperative societies; but also a political movement which advocates for decentralisation, collective ownership, equity and solidarity.

We could write endlessly about the historical development of the cooperativist movement, but it suffices to say that new theoretical models and practices kept developing over time and space which brought the cooperative form to different dimensions of social and economic life. Added to the specific legal contexts of each state, this makes the characterisation and classification of cooperatives an arduous task. Some examples of coops - such as workers', housing and service cooperatives, and credit unions - are progressively gaining ground across multiple geographies and are especially relevant for achieving a post-capitalist social transformation. Workers' cooperatives are businesses owned and managed by its workers for their mutual benefit. Housing cooperatives are groups of people and the means they use to collectively control and manage their housing. Service cooperatives are associations, often community-based, for the production and provision of public utilities (like electricity, water or gas) to their members.

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Credit Unions are member owned financial cooperatives in which the members can collectively decide how to invest their savings and have access to relatively low rates for loans. The four forms follow the cooperative principles and are guided by the cooperative political values described above. These examples show that the cooperative movement is articulated across many social and economic dimensions that include production, reproduction, consumption and material infrastructure. The cultural element is another of the main strengths of cooperativism which has proved instrumental in spreading its popularity. There are countless organisations of local, national and international scope devoted to promote the ideas of cooperativism and articulate it as a political movement.

In the last decades of the 20th century, when neoliberalism awakened us from the dream of a welfare state, there was a resurgence of grassroots movements. Communitarian and localised strategies gained ground in the resistance against capital. In the global North, this took the form of a renewed interest in the cooperativist movement and workers' autonomy. In the global South, it was represented by autonomous Indigenous movements that struggled against extractivism and neocolonialism. In the whole world, it promoted a gradual recognition of the tasks of reproduction usually performed by women in sustaining the whole economy and, more generally, life on Earth. Therefore, the scope of political movements seeking grassroots autonomy expanded to become a rich ecology, of which cooperativism was an important node. The concept of solidarity economy was then coined to designate a multiplicity of economic practices (in a very broad sense) which contribute to building an alternative economic system that places life, and not profit, at the centre. It was constituted as an articulated movement in 1997 with the formation of the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy, a platform that connects national and regional solidarity economy networks worldwide.

The values and principles of the solidarity economy movement are very similar from those of cooperativism. However, it is important to understand the consequences of the shift of focus. By speaking of solidarity economy, we legitimate informal practices such as care work, swap shops, mutual aid groups or neighbourhood initiatives as economic practices. In doing so, we mobilise an inclusive and transformative understanding of the economy where the reproduction of life, and not capital, is the main goal. Cooperativism keeps being a central part of the solidarity economy, but the movement has expanded further.

Box: Cooperative neighbourhoods

Urban development and megaprojects have climbed to the top of the agenda of international investors in the last decades, and are currently at the forefront of global capital accumulation. Therefore, cities have become battlefields where a strong tension is in constant performance. On the one hand,

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urban space is produced as a market asset to be privately appropriated. On the other hand, people collectively transform the space to serve social and cultural practices. The cooperative movement has an important role to play in these processes, but will only become a valuable player if it can be articulated in sociopolitical structures of intercooperation and culture. These take the localised form of cooperative neighbourhoods, networks of coupled cooperatives and grassroots groups strongly attached to the territory but at the same time diverse and open. Cooperative neighbourhoods are spaces where the economy and the city intertwine to put life at the centre, where neighbourhoods are the physical and political expression of the self-management of the local communities. The goal of the cooperative neighbourhood is to rearrange the economic flows that cross the urban space in order to replace those interactions that promote capital accumulation with those that promote solidarity economies.

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URBAN METABOLISM AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Zhanna Baimukhamedova

Some might argue that it could be a sign of spending enough time on the Internet when one comes across an image in soft, pastel colors with an intricate font—possibly a variety of Georgia—saying something along the lines, We are all made of stardust. A rather cliché phrase is probably meant to attest to everyone’s uniqueness worthy of celebration, but in a surprising manner it also speaks to one important notion—we live in a world of finite resources. Thinking of stars and matter, and how things come to be is possibly a convoluted and unnecessarily complicated way to come to a conclusion that everything, however far apart, is interconnected through a web of elaborate, often imperceptible ties, and disturbances can have an effect that transcends time, geographies, and societal constructions. The concept of urban metabolism tries to capture this complexity of connections on a level of a city. In its simplest form, urban metabolism refers to a system of processes in a city whereby material and energy flows are produced, apprehended, used, and eliminated. Urban metabolism of a modern city looks like an hourglass, in which resources come in and waste goes out. Ideally, however, this process would be more circular which would allow keeping more resources in the system and reduce the footprint of cities.

In principle, urban metabolism is concerned with two major phenomena: material flow and energy flow⁸. Material flow refers to a sum of physical objects entering and leaving a city whose presence is necessary for a normal functioning of urban life. Such objects encompass everything from household items and foodstuffs to raw materials and waste. The objects of the material flow interact with one another and their users, foster services, are being put into production of other serviceable goods, and are, eventually, disregarded. Energy flow, as the name suggests, concerns itself with production, application, and dispersal of energy in a city. There, a stable energy source is paramount to operate even the most basic of functions. In José Saramago’s dark novel *Blindness* an unnamed city quickly turns into a human jungle when electricity shuts off, so the majority of foods turn to spoil and there is no way to have any sustenance delivered—gasoline also is quickly out⁹. In a less dystopian scenario, a city depends on energy in order to keep its quotidian functioning, hence the energy flow tries to assess how much energy is required, how to maintain its constant flow, which sources hit the bliss point of cost and performance, and how to deal with concurrent waste.

⁸ This is a simplified and rather instrumental definition of urban metabolism; there are important social and political dimensions of urban metabolism not covered here—see, for example, Wachsmuth, D. (2012) or Swyngedouw, E. (2005). From an urban political ecology perspective, metabolism is not just about material/energy flows and processes, but also includes an account of the social and political flows that shape these processes.

⁹ However, they are also blind which is one of the reasons why there are dire electricity shut-downs in the first place.

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Adopting a similar concept of cyclical flows of materials and energy, circular economy seeks to break away from a linear production and consumption model whose main operation principle is “take-make-use-dispose:” take raw materials, make an object, use it till it breaks (or a newer, better version comes about), and dispose of it. Such a linear model is contingent upon the believed disposability of everything—why save, repair, or reuse, when there is always surplus of objects to be consumed? One of the reasons why capitalism as an economic system has been historically so successful is because it creates needs that it itself “attempts” to solve by extracting and producing more, at an ever increasing speed. Circular economy aims to keep resources in the system by making sure that their use value remains stable and relatively high; yet, in its core it is still an active part of green capitalism. Essentially, circular economy tries to make the system operate more efficiently which often, albeit not always, leads to the Jevons paradox, i.e. a situation when the efficient use of resources leads to even more production and not to reduction of emissions. Circular economy has the potential of contributing to a paradigm change if it is combined with the right political efforts (such as degrowth), but inherently it is still a tool that does not deny business as usual.

One of the goals of the circular economy is to minimize the production of waste. One does not need to search far to see how unsustainable and nonsensical our current approach to waste is: packaging waste, for instance, is a regular guest in each household especially in the past several months as dressing in online stores and dining with delivery services have become an everyday routine for many. Mountains of tinfoil, plastic, and paper, and many combinations of all, overflow dumpsters, demonstrating how little concern for proper waste management there normally is. Certainly, some places have more efficient recycling systems, but the main problem with waste is not its elimination or repurposing—the problem stems from producing in such a way that inevitably creates huge amounts of waste in the first place. Waste is not something that occurs at the end of an object’s lifecycle: rather it is contingent upon its durability and possibility to be reused, both of which are largely dependent on the mode of production. Since the circular economy encompasses all stages of production, it also tackles the waste issue at the point when it matters most—way before it actually becomes waste.

To conclude, urban metabolism is a tool for analysis and description, and circular economy is an economic strategy. Both concepts have been connected with discourses and policies of sustainability, as they fit well with the idea that technological fixes will provide solutions for ecological crises. Sustainability often refers to the capability of a city to maintain its functioning as a social, political, and economic entity that provides its citizens with a decent standard of living while maintaining its energy consumption, material intake, and waste production relatively low. Certain perspectives on urban metabolism, namely the urban political ecology perspective, expand this rather narrow definition and try to address overlooked issues of sustainability such as power relations, governance, and agency. Yet even though the *This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 765389.*





concepts of urban metabolism and circular economy are in no way a silver bullet for humanity's many ills, they do have a potential to open up the horizon of possibilities by outlining an ideal that every city can strive toward.

Questions for discussion:

- Do you agree that, in its essence, circular economy does not break away from the scheme "capitalism as usual?"
- Why in your opinion have initiatives and political movements been getting "greener?" What effect/-s does this process have on societies? Can you think of an example?
- What is your opinion on the degrowth movement/-s? Which broad social, political, and economic changes are necessary for it to take hold?
- Does recycling work?

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MUNICIPALISM

Stephen Leitheiser

Municipalism is an approach to politics that is focused on organizing at the territorial level of a city or town. While municipalism in general has a very old history, here we will focus on more modern impulses for municipalism, or “new municipalism”. In this new municipalist approach, local government is seen as a lever or a vehicle - a means of grasping and exercising power - for pursuing social change.

Modern impulses to organize municipalist politics can be seen to have grown in the context of the “movement of the squares”. In 2011, groups of people took to occupying public squares all over the world - from Tahir in Cairo, to Syntagma in Athens, to Zuccotti Park in New York City - with a general goal of starting discussions around issues of economic and political inequality, and building more radical forms of participatory democracy. Many groups were formed around the revolutionary impulse of creating new autonomous and horizontalist institutions, modeled after the camps that were formed in the occupied space. While these impulses did not lead to the promised revolution, the squares movement planted a seed for radical change, that has ultimately contributed to the new municipalist movements that have been gaining traction ever since.

Recent years have been filled with the growth of new municipalist movements which have marked a strategic shift from ‘occupying squares’ to ‘occupying institutions’.¹⁰ Initiatives such as Massa Critica (Naples, Italy), Ciudad Futura (Rosario, Argentina), Beirut Madinati (Beirut, Lebanon), Zagreb Je Nas (Zagreb, Croatia), and the Jackson-Kush Plan/Cooperation Jackson (Jackson, Mississippi) have since sprung up over the globe,¹¹ and have even begun to develop translocal networks of solidarity, meeting at networking events, grouping and mapping themselves as “Fearless Cities” (<http://fearlesscities.com/>). But what makes municipalism theoretically distinct as a political strategy?

Throughout the modern era, most hegemonic political thought and action has prioritized the nation state as the primary target of politics and vehicle for effecting transformative change. Therefore, municipalism can be understood as a school of thought and a practice that has emerged vis-à-vis the nation state. As such, all municipalist movements have, to varying degrees, a critique of the nation state - at least in its current expression. They are at least somewhat suspicious of the notion that desirable changes can be achieved through the centralized apparatus of the nation state. Yet, a municipal focus does not mean that these groups have fallen into the ‘local trap’ that overlooks multi-scalar dimensions

¹⁰ Thompson M (2020) What’s so new about New Municipalism? *Progress in Human Geography*

¹¹ <https://roarmag.org/magazine/municipalist-movement-internationalism-solidarity/>

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of power and political economy. Rather than an end point of transformative politics, the municipal scale is simply a strategic entry point for organizing and building change. The goal of new municipalism in this sense is to effect a transformation of politics itself, towards what some have called more “feminine ways of thinking and doing” (i.e. horizontalism, cooperation, dialogue), in contrast with the “masculine ways of thinking and doing” associated with political action and thought at the nation state level.¹²

Another important concept in municipalist thought is dual power, or the building of autonomous/independent institutions and organisations outside of those dominated by state and corporate power. Dual power aims to avoid co-optation, or the incorporation of politics into the status quo that neutralises radical content. In doing so, it also aims to build counter-hegemonic mutualist institutions that challenge the state and capital for legitimacy. To the extent that municipal movements do engage with the (local) state, as some form of engagement may be seen as a necessary reality of modern politics, most attempt to do so with “one foot in and one foot out” of existing institutions.

The above factors describe a general mode of operating for municipalist initiatives and the “Fearless Cities” listed above. However, there is no strictly defined blueprint of what municipalist politics is, and how it should proceed in achieving its goals. Experiments in recent decades have seen varying levels of success.

Many campaigns for (re)municipalisation - bringing urban service delivery and infrastructure under local democratic control - have seen citizens working to socialise certain aspects of economic life in the city (e.g. water, housing, energy, sanitation). In the past two decades, this upsurge has seen more than 1,400 cases of (re-)municipalisation in 58 countries around the world.¹³ Another famous and controversial example of municipalist engagement with institutions can be found in Barcelona, where Barcelona en Comú (BeC, Barcelona in Common) has been conducting an ongoing experiment of what happens when a municipalist movement attempts to enter into local electoral politics. The “citizen platform” was launched in 2014 with the aim to unite a diverse coalition of citizen interests, classes, and activist groups and bring more open and participatory democratic modes of governance to the city. The levels of successes and strategies continue to be debated, and municipalism remains on the cutting edge of contemporary radical political thought and action.

¹² <https://roarmag.org/magazine/municipalism-feminization-urban-politics/>

¹³ Kishimoto S, Steinfors L and Petitjean O (2019) *The Future is Public: Towards Democratic Ownership of Public Services*. In: Amsterdam, 2019, available at: <https://futureispublic.org/>

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Further viewings and readings:

Laura Roth (Barcelona en Comú): Municipalism and the feminisation of politics - [YouTube](#)

Cooperation Jackson: Building a Social and Solidarity Economy - [YouTube](#)

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