Socialism in More Than One City

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"What is the Commune, that sphinx so tantalizing to the bourgeois mind?" Marx asked in 1871 about the Paris Commune. In our own time, it is not only the bourgeoisie that is tantalized by the politics of the city. Movements on the left are increasingly looking to the local as a place to build power. We are living in a municipalist moment.

Across the United States, cities have become islands of progressive possibility. The sanctuary cities movement has compelled municipal governments to aid and shelter immigrants and refugees. The climate movement has won municipal pledges to adhere to emissions reduction targets and pass Green New Deal legislation. In many cases, the labor movement's Fight for $15 won minimum wage increases and other new protections for fast-food workers at the municipal level before pushing for state legislation. And unions are turning cities into laboratories for new labor law frameworks for platform workers.

These reform efforts are buoyed by a tide of successes at the ballot box: Kshama Sawant in Seattle, Chokwe Antar Lumumba in Jackson, a slew of socialists in Chicago, Larry Krasner in Philadelphia, a progressive coalition in Richmond—every recent election cycle has put more leftists in office in local governments.

This phenomenon isn't limited to the United States; leftists in many countries with an ascendant authoritarian right have turned to cities as places to consolidate, experiment, and grow. Last year in Turkey, an eastern town called Tunceli elected a communist mayor, who has restored the town's Kurdish name and set about creating a cooperative food system. In Recoleta, Chile, another communist mayor has openly violated the neoliberal Chilean constitution's prohibition on government competing with the private sector by opening a cooperative pharmacy network, a free adult education system, free dental clinics and after-school programs, community healthcare centers, and a bookstore.

The city as a site for politics has been theorized across the political spectrum. Benjamin Barber's *If Mayors Ruled the World* (2013) argues that

the nation-state is too small to respond to the challenges of globalization and too big for democracy. Barber instead envisions cities under the management of CEO-like mayors as the ideal scale for liberal technocracy. Marxist Henri Lefebvre proposed a "right to the city" in 1968, an idea further developed by geographer David Harvey; they saw the organization of the city as a terrain of struggle between capital and the working class. In the 1980s, Murray Bookchin developed ideas for a "libertarian municipalism" that called for ecologically sustainable cities governed by direct democracy, producing for their needs with cooperatives.

The municipalist turn hasn't followed any of these theories explicitly; more often, it represents an emergent strategy (a term coined by business theorist Henry Mintzberg, and applied to a social movement context by adrienne maree brown in her 2017 book of the same name) rather than a deliberate one. We didn't intend to end up here, but here we are. So where can we go from here? Could we find a road through municipalism to socialism?

Many socialists would say no, arguing that we need to focus on electoral fights for state and national office. Indeed, it is easy for socialists to see only the limitations of municipal power: restrictions on taxing the rich through city government, vulnerability to capital flight, and the constant menace of preemption by state and federal legislation, to name just the most obvious.

It is true that every high point of municipalist praxis in history is also a cautionary tale. The Paris Commune was drowned in blood after seventy-two days. Democratic socialists governed "Red Vienna" from 1919 to 1934, when they were overthrown in a fascist coup; thousands of members of their party were murdered in concentration camps. In the United States, scores of cities were governed by socialist mayors in the early years of the twentieth century. The largest and most well-known of these was Milwaukee, where socialist mayors presided over a "sewer socialism" until 1960. It ended with an unsuccessful rearguard battle against racist urban planning policies that encouraged white flight to the suburbs and eroded the city's tax base through deindustrialization. The same fate befell what historian Joshua B. Freeman terms, in his book of the same name, *Working-Class New York*, the "social democratic polity" shaped by unions and left political parties in the postwar era. Like Milwaukee, the city was hollowed out by white flight, deindustrialization, and corporate tax breaks, culminating in the 1975 fiscal crisis, when Wall Street and the federal government orchestrated a capital strike that forced the city to accept austerity.

The historic defeats of municipal socialism are sobering, and the limits of the strategy are real and substantial. But we are already in a municipalist moment whether we like it or not. If the limits of socialism in one city are to be overcome, it can only be by engaging with municipalism—in order to go beyond it. By looking at two contemporary cases of deliberate municipalism in practice—in Barcelona, Spain, and Jackson, Mississippi—we can begin to discern what's possible both within and beyond city limits.

Ada Colau, the first woman to serve as mayor of Barcelona and a member of Barcelona en Comú (Daniel Bartolomé)

Barcelona en Comú

In 2011, plazas in cities across Spain were occupied by a mass movement against the effects of a deep economic crisis: unemployment, foreclosures, and evictions. The movement of the squares came to be known as the *indignados* or 15M, named after May 15, the date of one of the first major mobilizations. That year, protests were breaking out worldwide, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street. But like Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish occupations were ephemeral and eventually succumbed to police repression. For some activists, the lesson was that you needed to go inside—not by giving up and going home, but by taking over city hall. Since then, Spain has become the global center of a new wave of movements that have sought to take over city governments.

The new municipalism has taken root most strongly in Barcelona, thanks to a political organization dubbed Barcelona en Comú—Catalan for "Barcelona in Common." It calls itself a "platform," not a party. Like a public square, it's a place for people to come together and participate in decision-making.

Where most political projects start with an assumed protagonist—the working class, the nation, or a particular identity or interest group—Barcelona en Comú began with a radical openness inherited from the squares, a rising feminist movement, and the culture of open-source technologies and social media. Echoing the Paris Commune, it eventually settled on the appellation of *citizens* to describe its participants. This was a citizenship distinct from the Spanish or Catalan nation. It meant people who live in

Barcelona, regardless of actual nationality or legal citizenship status. Politics would be made by those who showed up: your neighbors.

Barcelona en Comú hoped to expand participation in politics beyond the usual left suspects and to extend democracy beyond the typical representative model. Instead of a party leadership that formulated policy based on polls, focus groups, think-tank whitepapers, or the interests of bureaucrats or the party's biggest donors, Barcelona en Comú began with a lengthy and open process of facilitating grassroots dialogue through scores of neighborhood meetings. The goal was not just to create a policy platform, but to call into existence a political subject that would fight for it.

The result was an ambitious platform that aimed to transform the reach and role of the state. Barcelona en Comú would work toward a future in which essential public services—including education, housing, transit, food, and water—would be cheap or free, and improved. Public officeholders would face new term limits and a ban on taking management positions in private companies in their sector. Real-estate speculators and banks would face sanctions. And decisions would be made in a new way, with an emphasis on participatory democracy.

The base-building paid off. In 2015, Barcelona en Comú won eleven representatives on the city council, a plurality of the forty-one available seats. Under the unusual rules of Barcelona's city government, the party with the largest number of seats selects the mayor. Barcelona en Comú chose former housing activist Ada Colau, who became the first woman to ever hold the position.

Four years in, the balance sheet of the municipalist moment in Barcelona is remarkable. Even though housing regulation is not city-run, Barcelona en Comú was able to put a moratorium on new hotel construction, close over 2,000 illegal tourist apartments, sanction Airbnb for illegal establishments, and even begin to expropriate landlords who keep apartments vacant. They set up a sustainable public energy company, a publicly owned dental clinic that offers affordable rates, and the city's first municipal LGBTQ center. The city created coop businesses for migrants and refugees and is attempting to use city procurement to source from cooperatives. More recently, they enacted a measure requiring that 30 percent of new buildings be used for affordable housing and created an anti-eviction unit. The platform also continues to coordinate neighborhood assemblies and issue-based "commissions" to guide the party's elected representatives. Currently, Barcelona en Comú has over 15,000 active participants in an online forum built to debate and vote on policies. At the party headquarters, a thermometer chart on the wall tracks the number of people active in grassroots bodies: before the 2019 election it was over 1,500.

The victory in Barcelona was part of a series of wins across Spain; Zaragoza, Madrid, A Coruña, Cadíz, and Valencia also elected municipalist "platforms," or *ondas* (waves), that put forward similarly populist agendas.

Barcelona en Comú has also inspired other municipalist projects around the world, which have cohered in the "Fearless Cities" network. Anchored by Barcelona, the network reflects an awareness of how many local issues are the result of global trends and power structures. For municipalism to win, it must extend beyond the boundaries of the city.

The limits of municipal power have become apparent in a number of areas of Barcelona en Comú's work, many of which turn on control of the police. There are in fact three police forces that patrol Barcelona: the Guàrdia Urbana (controlled by the City of Barcelona); the Guardia Civil (controlled by the Spanish state), which enforces immigration laws; and the Mossos D'Esquadra (controlled by the Catalonian province), which carries out evictions. Control of the city government, in other words, does not equate to control of the repressive state apparatus in Barcelona.

An example of how this stymies the municipalist program can be seen in the treatment of immigrant and refugee street vendors, called *manteros*, who have become a litmus test for local politicians. The right calls for a police crackdown, appealing to shop and restaurant owners, who see a threat to their customer base, and to right-wing Barcelonans, who see migrants as a dangerous other. Without the power to rein in the police, Barcelona en Comú attempts to welcome newcomers and offer undocumented immigrants social services and a path toward integration in Barcelona's society. For example, in March 2017 the city government helped a group of *manteros* created a worker cooperative called Diomcoop with its own fashion line. The city of Barcelona has offered some resistance to the callous indifference, militarization, and brutality that have characterized the response of the EU, the Spanish state, and the Catalonian province to the Mediterranean migrant crisis, attempting to change negative views of refugees and migrants through a grassroots awareness campaign. But the city has stopped short of open defiance. Immigrants in Barcelona still live in poverty and at risk of police repression and deportation.

Housing policy reveals other limits of municipal power. The Spanish constitution contains a provision that forces those who get evicted to keep paying their mortgages. These legal obstacles force anti-eviction activists and tenant unions to organize beyond the scale of the city.

The limits to municipal power aren't just external. Barcelona en Comú has faced other challenges that stem from its cross-class composition. City governments are large employers, opening the possibility of using government power to advance the labor movement through public-sector unionism. But the Colau administration, faced with budgetary considerations, has a mixed record on labor. When taxi drivers went on strike for a week against Uber, the city government sided with drivers and heavily regulated the ride-share company. But Colau drove a harder bargain for public-sector workers in the city's subway system, who went on strike over wages and health and safety issues and ultimately had to settle for only minor gains.

Of all the challenges faced by Barcelona en Comú, however, the most significant has been the rise of Catalan nationalism. The longstanding conflict between Catalonia, Spain's richest and most politically progressive province, and the central government in Madrid came to a head in October 2017, when the Catalonian government attempted to conduct a nonbinding referendum on independence from Spain. The Spanish government deployed boatloads of riot police and imprisoned ten Catalan parliamentary members and activists in an attempt to preempt the vote. This heavy-handed reaction pushed many Catalonians into the arms of the independence movement. Catalonian flags now festoon practically every single balcony in Barcelona. Over two million voters cast their ballot for independence—over 90 percent of the vote.

Colau's administration remained agnostic on the referendum, refusing to endorse it but also condemning police violence and allowing the referendum to take place in city-owned buildings in defiance of Madrid's attempt to forbid the vote. The victory of the independence movement in the referendum and ongoing repression of the movement by the Spanish state have made this position of neutrality difficult to maintain. This stance has taken a toll: in elections in June 2019, Barcelona en Comú lost by 5,000 votes, coming in second to the pro-independence social democratic party Esquerra Republicana (ERC).

Barcelona en Comú has attempted to develop a sort of municipal citizenship that cuts against the legal and cultural definitions of community put forward by both the Spanish state and Catalan separatists. But the imagined community of Barcelona en Comú is hard-pressed to compete with the Catalonian nation. To maintain her place as mayor, and to defeat ERC, Colau formed a coalition with anti-independence forces, including both right-wingers and the Catalan Socialist Party. Barcelona en Comú will govern for another four years, but without the legitimacy of even a plurality and at the cost of further alienating constituents who want independence from Spain.

Tensions over nationalism continue to intensify. In October, members of the Catalan government were sentenced to multiple years in prison for "sedition" for organizing the referendum. Fiery protests erupted in response. Again, Colau attempted to walk a middle line, calling for the release of the political prisoners and condemning violent protests in the same breath. In November's election, the Spanish far right capitalized on nationalist anxieties, doubling its number of seats in parliament. In what looks at the moment like a small sign of hope, the ascendancy of the right has forced the left to close ranks, with the Socialist Party going into coalition with Podemos, the upstart left party aligned with the municipalists.

Barcelona en Comú set out to create a new political subject and transform the city. That task, complicated by the competing imagined communities of the Spanish and Catalonian nations, is now more urgent than ever.

Cooperation Jackson

The Confederate flag still flies over Mississippi, occupying about one-third of the state flag. But you won't see it over the Medgar Wiley Evers International Airport in the state capital of Jackson. That's because the airport is controlled by the city—at least for now. And the city is run by Chokwe Antar Lumumba.

Elected mayor of Jackson in June 2017, Lumumba pledged to turn this 80 percent African-American city into "the most radical city on the planet." The pledge was new, but the struggle is old. Chokwe Antar Lumumba is the son of Chokwe Lumumba, elected mayor of Jackson in 2013 after a lifetime as a movement leader. His platform was to use the resources of city hall to advance the Jackson-Kush Plan, a radical proposal designed by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM) and the New Afrikan People's Organization to build a solidarity economy based on cooperative business, transform the government into a participatory democracy, and win black self-determination and human rights.

Chokwe Lumumba first came to Jackson in 1971 as an activist with the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), a black nationalist organization that advocated self-defense and sought reparations and a plebiscite for a republic in the Southern Black Belt with an economy rooted in *Ujamaa*, a cooperative economic model developed by Julius Nyerere in postcolonial Tanzania. The capital of the RNA was to be in Hinds County, Mississippi, where Jackson is located. It made sense as a place to start organizing for black self-determination: Hinds County is one of eighteen majority-black counties that make up an area that Cooperation Jackson, the grassroots arm of the movement that focuses on economic democracy, calls Kush.

Interviewed decades later, Lumumba said, "We came in peace, but we came prepared." The white-supremacist power structure of Mississippi was having none of it. In August 1971, local police raided the headquarters of the RNA. One officer was killed, and eleven RNA members were imprisoned (Lumumba happened to be out that day). Lumumba returned to Detroit to go to law school, returning to Mississippi a decade later to begin work as a public defender.

Overt violent repression was complemented by economic warfare. Following the same pattern of white flight that eroded the tax base of most major U.S. cities in the postwar era, Jackson went from 60 percent white in 1960 to 18 percent white in 2010. Investment was withdrawn from the urban core, and a new lily-white suburban ring was built around the city. Those remaining in Jackson faced the rise of a racist system of mass incarceration—from 1978 to 2012, the prison population of Mississippi ballooned from 2,896 to over 22,319, one of the highest rates of incarceration in the United States.

In 2003, Nissan constructed a giant plant in a suburb of Jackson, followed by many other manufacturers looking to escape union wages and

Chokwe Antar Lumumba, mayor of Jackson, Mississippi (Lumumba for Mayor)

high taxes. Workers at the Nissan plant have tried to form a union with the United Auto Workers, but organizing efforts have been stymied by threats (including from Mississippi's governor) and anti-union firings.

Locked out of organizing at the point of production, activists have seized on the city as the terrain for struggle. Organizing the city is one component of the Jackson-Kush Plan. Based on the premise that political self-determination is not possible without economic self-determination, Lumumba's Jackson-Kush Plan was designed to build autonomous power for achieving both.

In an inversion of the civil rights movement strategy of leveraging the federal government against local white-supremacist elites, Jackson activists see municipal government as a tactical space where their movement can gain strength. The strategy, in the words of Kali Akuno, cofounder and director of Cooperation Jackson, is to use the power of city hall to help create the base for a social and solidarity economy—by ensuring a stable market and access to capital for workers' cooperatives through city contracts and credit unions, and by opening access to expertise, training, and other resources.

The first pillar was the People's Assemblies. Initially organized in New Orleans by the People's Hurricane Relief Fund after Hurricane Katrina, the assemblies were organized in Jackson to address community issues, wage strategic campaigns to leverage pressure on political and economic decision-makers, and create a culture of direct democracy. According to movement strategist and writer Makani Themba-Nixon, the assemblies became "forums for mass engagement to address the issues that affect

a community's life." By 2010, the People's Assembly had more than 300 members citywide, a potent force in a city with municipal voter turnout hovering around 25,000.

The People's Assembly gave a mandate to Chokwe Lumumba to run for municipal office. He was elected to the city council in 2009 and then as mayor in 2013, with over 80 percent of the vote. His first priority was to repair the city's crumbling infrastructure, a difficult task given the limited power of city government to levy new taxes. Rather than impose a progressive tax on the wealthy, he shepherded through a referendum to raise the sales tax by 1 percent to pay for infrastructure improvements.

He had little time to give fuller expression to his program. Chokwe Lumumba died on February 25, 2014, after just seven months in office, a tragic setback for the movement.

Drawing upon the reputation of his father, Chokwe Antar Lumumba was elected mayor in 2017 on a platform that pledged to continue the Lumumba legacy. However, two years into his administration, the relationship between city hall and the grassroots has soured. Without an alliance with city hall, hopes of leveraging city procurement, labor law, or other aspects of municipal power to build cooperatives have diminished. The rupture has been made worse by an exodus of grassroots activists to city hall. According to Themba-Nixon, "Virtually all the organizers working on the People's Assembly were called into service for the administration with MXGM, even recruiting organizers and staff from outside Mississippi."

The movement is coming under pressure from the state as well. The state legislature, dominated by Republicans, maneuvers to put municipal resources that bring money into the city, such as the airport and the city zoo, under state authority. The state legislature also took money from the 1 percent sales tax and redirected it to the state. It has introduced legislation to determine the development of downtown Jackson, passed laws allowing racial profiling in the city, and criminalized the LGBTQI community. Rukia Lumumba, sister of the current mayor, has written that these efforts amount to an attempted "takeover."

With a city government hemmed in by state authorities and starved for cash, and a split between elected reformers and the grassroots, today Cooperation Jackson focuses on the economic self-determination aspect of the Jackson-Kush Plan. Following the cooperative model of Mondragón in Spain, it aims to create a federation of workers' cooperatives. Cooperation Jackson operates at the same time as a vehicle for political education, and a structure enabling administrative, financial, and material solidarity.

In a vision evocative of Afrofuturism, Cooperation Jackson hopes to help Jackson residents fabricate their own affordable housing at a "FABLAB" outfitted with 3D printers, computer numerical control machines, and other tools of what some call the fifth industrial revolution. It has also

launched Freedom Farm Cooperatives, aiming to realize food sovereignty through urban farming. Cooperation Jackson is also working to buy property to create a community land trust to secure affordable housing and to prevent gentrification in West Jackson, currently one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city.

The movement in Jackson faces unrelenting pressure from the white-supremacist Mississippi power structure. The Lumumba administration itself is reckoning with the limitations of municipal power, at times caving to austerity imperatives—for example, through the regressive sales tax to pay for infrastructure improvements. And in 2018 the city ended up in the uncomfortable role of cutting off water for households that cannot pay their bills. The split between the Lumumba administration and Cooperation Jackson has weakened the movement, depriving solidarity economy initiatives of the lever of municipal government power. Cooperation Jackson is working through the difficulties of inventing new forms of social relations under the constant pressure of capitalism and racism; many obstacles to achieving the movement's more ambitious goals remain ahead.

Beyond Municipalism

Barcelona and Jackson are two cities among many at the forefront of the municipalist moment. As the left gains power in city governments across the world, does this tale of two cities hold any lessons for those seeking a path through municipalism to socialism?

While each context presents different constraints and possibilities, these stories and many others indicate that certain trajectories of radical change inhere in the scale of the city. They demonstrate the potential for a reorganization of social reproduction and everyday life, a reimagination of the imagined community, and the possibility of new forms of democracy.

Municipalists have long glimpsed aspects of this possibility. As Daniel Hoan, socialist mayor of Milwaukee, wrote in his 1936 book *City Government*, "The rapid increase in the importance of the City is due mainly to the fact that no unit of government deals more intimately and frequently with the daily life of the average citizen than the local municipality." The city is the scale at which everyday life is experienced, and therefore also where it can be transformed at the level of social reproduction—as we see in repeated municipalist attempts across history to reorganize systems for healthcare, housing, education, food, and the gender roles that underpin all of these.

In these examples of emergent municipalism, the city has become a laboratory for creating what Henri Lefebvre termed "experimental utopias." But these radical tendencies are matched by a distinctive set of obstacles: preemption and interference by higher levels of government, the threat of capital flight, lack of control over fiscal and monetary policy, and difficulty in breaking with hegemonic forms of culture.

These barriers are not reasons to abandon municipalist organizing. The left arrived at this strategy not because it was easy, but because winning control of state and federal governments is even more challenging. The question is how we can leverage gains at the municipal level to transform the system at expanding scales. That strategy needs to confront the failures at the origin of the municipalist moment, including but not limited to right-wing control of federal and state governments and a divide-and-conquer strategy that pits suburban and rural areas against urban ones.

Rather than appealing to voters only in election years, a viable municipalism must take a movement-building approach. In the United States, rather than waiting for Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, free higher education, labor law reform, decarceration, or immigration reform to die in a deadlocked Congress, we can build municipalism where and how we can—as many movements are already doing. Victories in these campaigns present viable reforms that can spread through networks of cities under left control, creating a countervailing force to Republican control of governments in heavily rural states.

This aggressive strategy of building municipal socialism will lead to conflict with capital and the state through lawsuits, state interference, and even extralegal violence. We cannot shrink from this confrontation. We may not win every battle, but the struggle for municipal socialism builds organizations that can win the war.

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