09 2016

Let's play? Citizenship, subjectivity and becoming in municipalism

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Who is the subject of municipalism? The movements, the elected officials, the citizens? The question of the political subject concerns not just particular individuals or groups of individuals, but also the lively becoming of a collective subject. What kind of collective becomings does municipalism imply? Beyond citizenship as defined by the bourgeoisie and the state, how can municipalism put another form of subject at the forefront of its politics? More than good policies, this requires a bodily, subjective hacking that can open onto becomings beyond the city as *Burg* of the *Bürger*. This is more a matter of micropolitics and care than one may think.

A new game: municipalism

Beyond the electoral hype, municipalist processes in Spain have been far from smooth or simple. On the contrary, they are of a staggering complexity and often also toughness. The lessons to learn from this are being formulated bit by bit (they are many and diverse), as we now enter into a third phase of sorts regarding municipalist projects. Following one year of electoral campaigns – full of promise, enthusiasm, possibility, solidarity, activation and

empowerment[1] – there was a year of stepping and growing into government – marked by a vertiginous learning curve, by rearrangements and recompositions of social and institutional forces, and a lot of electoral priorities (the 2015 regional elections in Catalunya and two general elections in 2016).

This electoral cycle now being over[2], there is a period of consolidation and maturing ahead. Enter a phase where actions and policies come to show effects, where habits and strategies come to take shape, and critical public debate ripens. The dynamics of municipalism have implicated everyday life in the city, social movements and new institutional actors alike, albeit at different levels of intensity and different angles. In the streets and municipal institutions, there is a new set of discourses and approaches that shape the city; between the grassroots in streets, neighbourhoods and institutions there is a complex relation of affinity, tension and contradiction; in the halls of power themselves, and in the new organizations that have formed (such as Barcelona en Comú, with which I am most familiar), there are new logics of power, knowledge and social relation to be reckoned with, relating to party and institution.

All this means a powerful shakeup of the social and political landscape of the cities, through which new alliances, rifts, spaces and rhythms have emerged. Two years into this dynamic, many possibilities, positions and limits have become clearer. The challenge here, as with most lively and complex political processes, is to find ways of addressing them that don't rely on too much reduction of complexity. Beyond pure and hard critique from the outside, or defensive or self-glorifying legitimations from the inside of institutions, it is now time to think along the margins and fault-lines of municipalism. It's there that care and the production of subjectivity become possible.

Speaking of the post-Kirchner moment in Argentina – another kind of phase of electoral processes – Diego Sztulwark formulates the need for a 'care for critique and for becomings.' While the moment of disappointment and reactionary backlash at the electoral level certainly require other tools and concepts than those of the current municipalist phase, the question of care and becoming is pertinent at all these levels. 'The concept of the left, in micropolitical terms, only serves the purpose of becomings, said [Deleuze]. Becoming requires care.'[3]

The game, the ball, and municipalist subjectivities

After the electoral phase brought together so many people in cities across Spain, what changes in subjectivity and collectivity have been and are being enabled? This question is not a side aspect but indeed the central question that makes municipalisms interesting as more than radical reformisms. The role of neighbourhood and thematic assemblies (known as 'ejes'), as powerhouses of encounter, debate and proposal, is a vital part of that question in municipalist projects. In the campaign phase, they were the motors of collective thought and becoming, yet in the phase of governance their role became unclear. How to think about the agents and subjects of municipalism, in its different phases?

Brian Massumi has some intuitions about the political economy of belonging that are worth sharing here[4]. In looking for the subject of the soccer game, he notes, we might be surprised to find it's not the players. The subject, as that around which movement tendentially crystallizes, is mostly the ball. Different players compose with it at times, but it's the ball that catalyzes, that animates the game. The players, far from acting consciously, are caught in a relational dynamic that is polarized between two goals.

'The ball moves the players. The player is the object of the ball. [...] When the ball moves, the whole game moves with it. Its displacement is more than a local movement: it is a global event.' This collective movement-action is far from conscious, it is immanent and reflexive and relationally in becoming, following the pull of the goals and thus the potential of scoring.

The subject is where the movement unfolds, not where the plans are drawn up. The subject is that around which becoming happens, with all kinds of partial -subjects and forces acting on it. In this sense, municipalism is the municipalist ball that has animated thousands of people to make the city of Barcelona into a playing field, polarized between two goals – FC 'casta' vs. FC 'comú' – and striving to win. 'Guanyem Barcelona' was the first name of the municipal platform in Barcelona and it threw a big ball out into the social field, with the aim of 'winning back the city'. On the one hand the old corrupt elites, the *casta*, the politics of privilege. On the other, the 'common people' or people defending the common good, a new team that grew exponentially, with seemingly endless human resources, energies, ideas.

A game that created a vast process of collective movement at the city level. Thousands of people ran, kicked, defended, watched and commented through the electoral campaign. That the team was eventually called 'Barcelona en Comú' in a process of confluence with other parties only seemed to extend the playing field. 'Municipalism' was the name of the game, its subjects many and never sovereign. A figure, a humble mascot-saint called Ada Colau, guided them. A grand sense of belonging ensued, something had grown between hundreds and thousands of people, something *of them: they* made electoral victory happen through assemblies, discussions, campaigning. 'In becoming is belonging' says Massumi: Barcelona en Comú was something that belonged to

them and that they belonged to. A powerful collective subject was born, without a clear identity but with much liveliness.

With electoral victory, the ball was kicked into the town hall. Was it still the same game? How could it be played in the streets? In the institutions, it was a matter of star players who needed to virtuosically manoeuvre the municipalist project so it could survive. The struggle is still alive, but the subject of the game changed from that wild and diffuse *común* to a much more concrete set of agents. And so the question of the subject of that municipalist game, of who it belongs to and who belongs to it, or in Massumi's words, around who it is that movement tendentially unfolds, rose anew on the horizon. The idea was always to subvert the subject-object dynamic of governing, to 'govern by obeying', but the institutional playing field really doesn't work like that of streets and squares. Its rules are solid, its players strongly hierarchized...

Massumi offers an interesting view on how the rules of a game like soccer are changed: through the very styles of its players, who find singular ways of subverting rules, mobilizing enthusiasm and inhabiting rules in a way that subverts the power of the referee. Change happens through the bodies and relations between players, together with the force of the public. It happens by embodying something that can subvert given rules, if one plays it from within.

The term 'municipal revolution' is thus a bit of a misnomer, since the game a priori stays the same – same offices in the same old town halls, same divisions of labour and decision, same laws to obey, same media to respond to – but the players change.. Entering the institutions, wWhat Barcelona en Comú – as a set of elected officials linked to a party – can do is the renaming and reshuffling of departments, the invention of new roles, responsibilities, forms of consultation and dialogue, so that the game itself may change

slightly. The ways of embodying, the style and kinds of relations that characterise this process, make a big difference.

In winning, Barcelona en Comú also threw a ball out between different cities in order to build an international champions team of cities perhaps) – the most promising political horizon at a time when the game at the level of states and EU have come to be so blocked and reactionary. Such international networking is boosted by the fame of the 15M movement, the FC Barcelona and the image of the innovative city, as well as by catalan pride.

The institution … power passes through the body

The municipalist olé olé produces echos, yet in the city itself it also changed tonality and phase. Beyond nostalgia or purity, the question is about how to think and inhabit this new situation. This is a lot about macropolitical cunning, but it's also still about relations and bodies. The question of becoming passes through the body, and it matters a lot how institutions (and parties) conform people and groups to their codes. To resist this conformity is hard work, since it requires finding heterodox ways of inhabiting and embodying power relations. Such embodying is the perhaps hardest social and psycho-somatic labour, as we can tell when Ada Colau tells of the process of becoming mayor in the movie *Alcaldessa*. Recounting how she became an image, abstracted or doubled from her own body and life, there are tears, bewildered laughs, silences. Complex emotions and situations.

For grassroots activists, entering professional politics implies a bodily, relational and affective reschooling that turns the world upside down. Certain ways of being and speaking with others become impossible. Time is scarce and rhythms are determined by

agendas managed by others, as well as overdetermined by electoral cycles. Nobody quite has time to tell of the embodied and psychic effects of entering into institutional and party politics, but these are not secondary to power. These bodily-relational changes are not just symptoms but in themselves plazing fields of power, conditioning the range of manoeuvres that are possible, what bodies can do.

'It's not my revolution if I can't cry in it' said a friend from Barcelona en Comú in a session of collective debrief across movements and people working closer to institutions. How are those with the aura of power to care for themselves and another, how are those outside to care for them? Care does need time: just as you can't stroke a baby to sleep in a rush, you can't deal with complex experiences, affects and relations with taylorist efficiency. It requires slow processes of sensing and listening – of devoting attention – in order to find articulations, gestures and arrangements that bodies and subjects can work around. In this sense, care in the first place means the many conversations – intimate and public, individual and collective – that allow for the limits and possibilities of municipalism to be addressed in embodied ways.

It appears that the only way to sustainably inhabit existing political institutions is with cynicism. The halls of power are designed as a masculine space, for people with no care needs and responsibilities, ready to give it all up for political work. Friendships and family life are a dream of the past, as are care and self-care. Participating in conversations and debates beyond ceaseless tactical and strategic political considerations becomes difficult. Between the many highs and lows of the political game, it often takes fake enthusiasm and brute voluntarism to make it. The ideal subject of those spaces are the young power-hungry 'Ciudadanos' of the Spanish centre right:

their bodies high on fitness, cocaine and caviar, steeped in entrepreneurialism and competitiveness, dressed in smart suits that others iron for them.

For many of the municipalists inhabiting town hall, the most frustrating thing is that their relation to power is misunderstood. 'We don't have power, we merely manage a small part of it' – being in and around municipal government mostly means to be a slave to power rather than being sovereign. Decisions are taken through complicated dispositifs, through incessant moves that often merely react rather than initiate, in relation to actors that often remain invisible and impermeable. How to think governance beyond the fantasy of being sovereign? Answers and hypotheses around this are being tested. Taking the embodied and relational aspect of governing into account is certainly one part of the answer.

Citizens? The political subject as (re)produced by the institution

At the level of the particular subject, it's old news that white, property-owning males have tended to define the horizon of the political for centuries. They made the rules, built the playing field and tribunes, set the referees, coined the terms, set the tempo of the political game. Barcelona en Comú departs from a strong feminist ethics and a connection to the working classes (*clase popular* or *el pueblo*, *la gente normal* or *la gente común*, as they say). The 'feminization of politics' and eviction of the *casta* from institutions of course doesn't stop at electing a female mayor from a working family, but also means changing the forms of doing politics in order to address women, workers and poor or precarious people, migrants.

'If we have the power to imagine another city, we can also transform it' is one of the key mottos of Barcelona en Comú. The question of imagining a government of the commons is not about having a woman, a proletarian or a non-white person in government, but about how the very forms and questions of politics can address themselves to another kind of subject. Beyond electoral identity politics, there need to be bodies that are affected by different forces – and thus by different dynamics of race, class, gender. This concerns both the partial subjects inside the institution (those that 'represent') and those bodies outside, as potential co-players.

The key formula for the political subject is the 'citizen'. Since the old days of cities, citizenship was limited to some, namely the *Buerger/Bürger*, the bourgeoisie. They would be let in and out, would hold rights and pay taxes. As such, at different points in history, every city had its outsiders and its normative subjects: in the ancient Greek polis, citizenship was defined by white free males. Women, peasants, slaves, metics, mercenaries, raiders and traders were its constitutive outsiders, contesting and subverting citizenship by generating different kinds of access for themselves. Engin Isin's book *Being Political* speaks about the genealogy of citizenship since antiquity, about who got to count as political in different kinds of cities. Isin describes the city as a difference machine – a complex space marked by solidaristic, agonistic and antagonistic strategies that define how strangers, outsiders and insiders are produced in the city.

Today, though the genealogy of citizenship points to the ancient polis, the 'normal' subject of politics is mostly defined through the state – issuing passports and monitoring economic activity – and called 'middle class', addressed as good consumers and taxpayers. Speaking with Isin, we can say that in its positing of subjects

through language, Barcelona en Comú pursued different solidaristic strategies (comú; todas/todos), agonistic (gente normal/común; la ciudadanía; veins) as well as antagonistic strategies (against the 1%, the casta, the political class). In its composition as an organization or electoral movement, Barcelona en Comú builds on the disenchanted middle class and precariat (the precariat being notably a generation of younger people denied the middle class experiences they were promised, property or a stable job notably) as well as the local working class. The former are its voters but also its active agents in campaigning, designing policy and organising; the latter are its electorate notably.

In the official discourse of Barcelona en Comú 'the citizens' (*la ciudadanía*) is not necessarily intended as referring to those holding citizenship, though etymologically and aurally it alludes to them:. Many will associate *ciudadanía* with 'papers' or with the state offices that process them. *Ciudadanía* in Spanish is what many of the state offices granting residence and nationality are called, a word that burns in the ears of migrants with bitter memories of humiliation, rejection, anxiety. *Ciudadanía* is also a way of referring to 'the citizens' or 'citizenry' and has high currency in some political discourses. New municipalist platforms too interpellate their subjects, the governed, with this word sometimes – particularly the Catalan autochthone don't taste that burning. Furthermore, the etymology of the term is inextricable from class, in the historical sense of the bourgeoisie (between the aristocracy and plebs), the *Bürger*, those whose clan and class background grants them access to the city and its spaces of rights.

It turns out, as the struggle of the migrant street-sellers in Barcelona (most of whom have no papers and thus no licence, and sell forged products) shows, that building an inclusive urban 'we' beyond local white populations is more difficult than imagined.

Not only is there a real limit to going beyond class-based solidarity within local and white populations, there is also a tension between how solidarity is enacted: the campaign to welcome refugees (*Ciutat Refugi* or 'City of Refuge'[5]) as such insisted on the need to welcome refugees but couldn't articulate this with concrete support for existing migrant populations in the city. An image of refugees as good, worthy victims and of paperless migrants as rebellious, sorry opportunists was strengthened rather than undone, feeding into the stereotypes and criminalizing practices of the right.

While *Ciutat Refugi* was a worthwhile experiment of affirming municipal power in the face of the state (the city pressuring the central state to let in refugees, based on its competencies in immigration and border control, to let in refugees), it led to a backlash at the local level. The balance between hacking the political subject at the city level and of affirming municipal autonomy is a delicate one. It is of little use to affirm municipal sovereignty (in the habitus of Catalan independentist movements) when at the same time the subject of politics remains the same – the *común* of this kind of project remains limited to the more or less autochtone, white, more or less 'civil' (the latter being strongly linked to the impulses of indignation charity that marked some pro-refugee campaigns while condoning criminalizing and racist discourses regarding migrants without papers, who happen to be darker skinned too).

The tension inherent in the term *ciudadanía* is thus symptomatic of the struggles of definition that will likely mark the current, post-electoral phase of municipal government. Institutions have the power to define their subjects, and although municipal institutions don't have much of say on the matter of citizenship these days since it's the state that grants and polices it, there are

still many back routes to redefining citizenship via the city. If a municipal project can subvert the code in which the 'normal' citizen was written – and he was written in the city, the polis, the civitas, the christianopolis – then it can be more than a daring project of reform.

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[1] Cf. Zechner, Manuela (2015) Barcelona en Comú: The city as Horizon for radical Democracy. Roarmag online.

[2] Or so it seemed as this text was being written, in summer 2016.

[3] Cf. Zechner, Manuela (2015) Barcelona en Comú: The city as Horizon for radical Democracy. Roarmag online.Diego Sztulwark (2016) Micropolíticas neoliberales, subjetividades de la crisis y amistad política (o por qué necesitamos criticar al kirchnerismo para combatir al macrismo)Micropoliticas neoliberales, subjectivities of the crisis and political friendship (or why we need to critique Kirchnerism in order to fight Macrism), Anarquia Coronada Blog. http://anarquiacoronada.blogspot.hr/2016/05/micropoliticas-neoliberales.html

[4] Brian Massumi (2002) The political economy of belonging. In: Parables for the Virtual, Duke University Press. Duke: Duke University Press.

[5] http://ciutatrefugi.barcelona/en/inicio