

Municipalism

A Critical Review

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The municipalist moment

In recent years, a growing number of popular movements demanding the “right to the city” have come to describe themselves as *municipalist* or *democratic confederalist*, lineages that are closely related to 20th century philosopher Murray Bookchin’s ideas of *libertarian municipalism* or *communalism*.

This critical review focuses on movements and organizations that today call themselves municipalist, or have been referred to as such in the literature on municipalism. We describe some of its important thinkers, movements, themes, and concepts. We reflect on some of the movement’s trends and patterns to see where it might be headed. We then share some of their debates and contradictions, gaps, and weaknesses.

By characterizing this review on municipalism as “critical,” we don’t mean this is an inventory of things not to like about municipalism. To the contrary, we engage critically in the following two ways, both at the same time:

Critical 1 We examine the municipalists’ assumptions, especially their unspoken ones. The left can no longer afford to enter into false agreements.

Critical 2 To acknowledge that we are in an urgent situation. To say the least.

In doing so, this exercise helps us refine our analyses and each others’ proposals for what to do, whether we call our movements municipalist or something other.

Municipalists, as their name suggests, organize at the unit of the municipality. That is to say, they organize locally but with the additional goal of bringing about governance by popular assemblies confederated with other assemblies.

Although there is a diversity of positions within municipalism, we can generally say that its movements seek to intensify decentralization over centralization, the networked over the isolated, the diverse over the monolithic. Like the Zapatistas in Chiapas, their anti-capitalist politics weaves everyday life struggles together with the global; their strategies are to build an autonomous self-government: a “dual power.”

There is more that municipalism borrows from the Global South: its political subject is not the individual but the collective, it emphasizes the greater potentials of the communal over the singular, and it seeks not individual but community ownership over the means of production.

As a preliminary conclusion, we find this movement to be ancestrally familiar; a liberatory ancestry that the last 500 years of colonialism has been trying to annihilate and that indeed can still be found across Planet Earth.

It's still unclear how much the municipalists will ward off co-optation, and too early to know if they will become another face of oppression in the name of resistance. Municipalists don't often say out loud that ours is a context of global war and captivity. Nor do they always make reference to the current planetary emergency, or to extractivism, extermination, collapse, or extinction.

Still, we think municipalism, even as a conversation starter, might help us challenge our pre-given ideas of politics and organizing in this profound moment of crisis. It is in this spirit that we offer this review to those of us in the heart of Empire, who need this kind of challenge most.

From the unceded territories of the Chumash, Tongva, and Powhatan peoples,
Linda Quiquívix, Haley Roeser, Dani Knoll, and Eleanor Finley

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Thinkers, movements, themes & concepts

The theory and analysis behind today's municipalist movements is the product of diverse voices and movement experiences – from urban feminists in Southern Europe to Indigenous groups in Latin America, to Black post-nationalist thinkers in the United States. More recently, in the summer of 2017, when Barcelona hosted the Fearless Cities conference, over 700 organizations participated from cities such as Beirut, Lebanon; Zagreb, Croatia; Naples, Italy; and Rosario, Argentina.¹ These projects tend to be in close conversation with one another, often overlapping in publications like *ROAR Magazine* and the MINIM Municipalism Observatory.

Despite the diversity of movements and peoples contributing to municipalism, one name does occur most often in the literature: **Murray Bookchin**. The son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, Bookchin (1921-2006) was a working-class socialist, ecologist, and theoretician from the United States who coined the term “libertarian municipalism” and later adopted “communalism” to describe his proposed political program. After moving from urban New York to rural Vermont in the 1970s, Bookchin helped build the **Institute for Social Ecology**, a movement and popular education space in a small town called Plainfield from where he would often spar about renewable energy, economic development, and direct democracy with a more well-known socialist from Vermont named Bernie Sanders. While the label “socialist” has been attributed to both men, perhaps Bookchin was closer to a socialist than Sanders was, or Bookchin was more than a socialist, depending on how one uses the term. Bookchin departed from Sanders by openly sharing with **anarchism** its rebellious drive against domination in all forms and, as an **ecologist**, against the domination of nature.

Seeking to make politics “ethical in character and grassroots in organization,” Bookchin called for a focus on the local and the communal.² He proposed that direct democracy could be achieved by making decisions through local **assemblies** (the “municipalist” part) that would take a combative position against the State’s drive to dominate (the “libertarian” part). He studied assembly-based movements of the past to learn how they addressed larger-scale questions, proposing that assemblies could confederate through councils, a **democratic confederalism** where the confederation’s sole function would be to coordinate and administer on behalf of the councils rather than exercise power over them. For Bookchin, the tension between democratic confederations and a dominating force like the State needed to be clear and uncompromising. Care needed to be taken so the councils and confederations would not be co-opted by state, provincial, or national

¹ Roth, Laura and Bertie Russell. 2018. *Translocal Solidarity and the New Municipalism*. *ROAR Magazine*.

² Bookchin, Murray. 1991. *Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview*.

forces, much less achieved by these means. For Bookchin, so-called “representational democracy” wasn’t democracy at all; he called instead for the construction of another power to replace the dominant system and make it irrelevant: a dual power.

The concept of **dual power** is appearing more and more today. The phrase hails from Vladimir Lenin during the Russian Revolution a century ago:³ after abolishing the monarchy, the phrase described a situation of two competing powers: the provisional government and the Soviets. In Bookchin’s libertarian municipalism, by contrast, the phrase dual power appears less descriptive and more strategic: the deliberate creation of directly democratic assemblies, rooted at the local level and confederated regionally and internationally, that could at once oppose and replace the State.

During his lifetime, Bookchin’s popularity ebbed and flowed. His ideas were prominent among the New Left, the Anti-Nuclear Movement, and Green Movements, both in the United States and abroad, most notably in Germany, Scandinavia, Italy, Spain, and, to a lesser extent, Turkey. Yet by the mid-1990s, things had slowed down, and the 2000s were impacted by 9/11 and the Green Scare where Washington targeted ecological movements under the label “ecoterrorism”.

A decade later, with the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, more of the world began to hear of Bookchin’s work from the 2012 Kurdish uprising in **Rojava**, the western Kurdish region in northern Syria. The Rojava struggle is a recurring movement in the municipalist literature; its intellectuals have directly credited Murray Bookchin as an influence for his ideas of democratic confederalism.⁴

Murray Bookchin’s daughter **Debbie Bookchin** is today a prominent fellow-traveler alongside Rojava and municipalist movements in Europe and the United States, particularly those in **urban** contexts. The younger Bookchin attended the first municipalist conference in 2017, which took place in Barcelona and attracted over 700 mayors, councilors, and activists across the world, as well as the Fearless Cities conference the following year in New York City. Debbie Bookchin is also a prolific writer on municipalism, taking inventory of how her father’s writings have inspired movements today not only in Rojava, but also in cities like Barcelona and Jackson, Mississippi.⁵

Barcelona en Comú, an organization prominent in the municipalist literature, was considered a “citizen revolution” when it won the mayor’s office in 2015 in Catalonia, Spain, Southern Europe. Coming from the 2010 Indignados global anti-austerity

³ Lenin, Vladimir. 1975. “The Dual Power”. *The Lenin Anthology*. London: Norton. pp. 301–304.

⁴ Damian Gerber & Shannon Brincat (2021) “When Öcalan met Bookchin: The Kurdish Freedom Movement and the Political Theory of Democratic Confederalism,” *Geopolitics*, 26:4, 973-997.

⁵ Bookchin, Debbie. 2017. “Radical Municipalism: The Future We Deserve” *Roar Magazine* 6

movement, Barcelona en Comú organized street demonstrations into neighborhood assemblies. From there, they took a hybrid-approach, engaging in electoral politics by running candidates for city government at the neighborhood and local level. These candidates, however, were tightly accountable to the assemblies from which they emerged. Such a culture of accountability has been fostered in Barcelona's legacy of autonomous directly democratic neighborhood assemblies, which have a degree of continuity going back to the at least 1970s. And of course, one cannot overlook the city's anarchist legacy, having been self-governing via anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist federations during the early period of the Spanish Civil War from 1933-1936. In 2015, Barcelona en Comú won the mayor's office, running Ada Colau, a housing and LGBTQ activist, alongside several seats in the city council and many more in the neighborhood councils.

Related to both the electoral victory in Barcelona and the struggle to confederate Rojava is the recurring nod to the **feminization of politics** in municipalist projects, where women, historically marginalized from politics, are understood as key to democratic participation, often serving in leadership positions. Ada Colau of Barcelona and the Women's Protection Units of Rojava are often pointed to as examples.⁶ Feminizing politics also entails changing how we communicate and relate to one another. In this struggle, women have seen not only personal and psychological liberation for themselves, but material change, as well. Feminizing politics means the replacement of a conflictual, winner-take-all approach to voting and debate with a consensus, **care-based** model where no one gets left behind.

An important example of **economic democracy** in the United States, the municipalist movement often points to **Cooperation Jackson** in Jackson, Mississippi.⁷ Using a blend of grassroots and electoral politics while promoting the growth of **worker-owned cooperatives**, its organizing work moves beyond a worker-centered model of economic justice toward a community-centered model, which focuses attention on racial justice in a majority-Black city. The organization's theoretical ambition is to collectively control the means of production, use participatory democratic processes to transform the economy, and integrate various practical initiatives like a **community land trust**, worker cooperatives, and a people's assembly into one coherent economic whole. The idea is to integrate different forms of cooperatives and mutualist enterprises into a **solidarity economy** that includes housing cooperatives, recycling cooperatives, childcare cooperatives, credit unions, and **mutual aid** networks.

⁶ Roth, Laura and Kate Shea Bard. 2017. "Municipalism and the Feminization of Politics" *Roar Magazine* 6

⁷ Akuno, Kali and Ajamu Nangwaya (editors). 2017. *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi*. Daraja Press.

Debates, contradictions, gaps & weaknesses

An assumption that goes unspoken about municipalism is that its movements often assume colonial geographies. That is, they often begin with the State's maps as the starting point for politics rather than defining and creating other geographies. Instead of an administrative unit "nested" under the nation state, more radical municipalist perspectives are asking whether there is unique revolutionary potential in organizing at the municipal level. The Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ), which administer municipalities of the Zapatistas' own creation and whose territories transgress official municipalities, teach us it's okay, even necessary, to create our own geographies, even as we still have to articulate with the dominant ones.

What about the municipalists' global geography? While Bookchin was a contemporary of Black Panther Party co-founder Huey Newton, he did not appear to engage with Newton's own call for communalism, specifically his theorizations of intercommunalism, which proposed a global articulation between communities rather than between States.⁸ The Zapatistas today are similarly conscious of Empire and its multi-scalar reconfigurations and provide a useful roadmap for organizing: "We start by analyzing what is happening in the world, then move to what is happening at the continental level, then to what is happening in this country, then to a regional and finally to a local level. From there, we develop an initiative and begin to move back up from a local level to a regional level, then to the national, the continental, and finally the global level."

More conventional liberals have argued that, in fact, we're already seeing that cities and towns with strong social movements are at the forefront of radical and innovative responses to climate change at the global scale. The Global Covenant for Mayors for Climate and Energy, of which Michael Bloomberg is co-chair, has been celebrated by the Symbiosis Research Collective as "a force to be reckoned with in international climate talks".⁹ Yet it remains to be seen whether this "force" can actually persuade powerful nations to take any action. It might instead point to municipalism's co-optation and capture. Newton's differentiation between "reactionary intercommunalism" (of The Above) and "revolutionary intercommunalism" (of The Below) can be helpful here.

It's notable here that many inspired by Bookchin have dropped "libertarian" from his proposal and kept just the "municipalism." It's unclear why the change, but we have a guess: In the United States context, at least, the word "libertarian" is most often used to

⁸ Newton, Huey. 1972. "The Technology Question," *The Huey P. Newton Reader*

⁹ Symbiosis Research Collective. 2018. "How Radical Municipalism can Go Beyond the Local." *The Ecologist*.

describe a hyper-individualist anti-establishment right-wing politics, characteristic of Trump supporters, rather than how the word is used elsewhere, particularly in Spain, where *libertario* that is closer to “anarchist.” Dropping the word opens up some possibilities while foreclosing others: not including “libertarian” could bring more people together under a general banner of “municipalism” who might interpret the former word as right-wing. However, it could also defang its original spirit by transforming municipalism into simple inclusion into the dominant politics, shepherding its energies into liberalism and strengthening the State.

Just as the qualifier “libertarian” has gotten dropped, the literature on municipalism often drops the social ecology component from the conversation, even if Bookchin began first with social ecology and from there asked, “What is the political system that leads to an ecological society?” Barcelona en Comú introduced ecological politics of “superblocks” to get rid of cars, but rarely addressed by municipalist movements is how parasitic cities can be on the countryside and on other geographies, and the ecological implications. Bookchin’s reframing of a city as an “ecocommunity” could be useful in these conversations.¹⁰

It’s a contradiction that a communal movement so frequently references an individual person as a founding theorist, although this phenomenon is not uncommon among the Western left. The limits of any individual doing the theorizing are revealed, for example, in some of Bookchin’s writings that spoke of assemblies from the past from which we might find inspiration, and included the settler assemblies of the bourgeois American Revolution. This also points to a slippery focus on form (assembly) over goal (settler-colonization, in the case of the American Revolution) with little critique of the foundational context of those assemblies (genocide and slavery).

Electoral politics exists through a geographical contradiction heavy in the municipalist literature as of this writing. The geographies of the municipalists, outside of Europe at least, are based on a colonial system of law, which again: often goes unsaid. Municipalist movements in the geography sometimes called the United States generally lack alliances with local Indigenous people. This is something the recent municipalist literature replicated in the earlier years, but has since been shifting toward an anti-colonial dimension.

While much of the municipalist literature has often assumed engaging in electoral politics, today there exists a great debate about it. The experiments in Barcelona showed that along with success in electoral politics, co-optation often follows, which then entails a deactivation of initiatives. In the United States, the experiments with

¹⁰ Bookchin, Murray. 1992. “Urbanization Without Cities: The Rise and Decline of Citizenship”

electoral politics have similarly found themselves weakened by placing too much emphasis on furthering current political structures, such as supporting progressive politicians. Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson is blunt about their experience here: once succeeding in the electoral realm, strengthening their assembly and their greater development work “became gradually eroded and then sidelined” with the emphasis to sustain themselves in office.

Because the direction municipalities propose is so different from a society so highly indoctrinated into individualistic, colonialist values, the movements need tremendous popular education and a confrontation with the material challenges (poverty, overwork, lack of resources) that inhibit popular participation and exhaust movement organizers. The college-educated leaders will need to unlearn the technocratic tendencies of advancing policy packages and instead focus first on the necessary base building.

Trends & patterns

One of the distinctive features of the municipalist movement is its objective to carve out a third space between social movements and traditional local politics and institutions. Thus unsurprisingly, one of the key controversies within the municipalist movement concerns how to do that without falling into the traps of conventional state politics on the one hand, or failing to cultivate coordinated power, on the other. What role do elections, campaigns, otherwise called “electoral politics” have in transforming the nature of city power? How exactly does one create a new citizenship?

At a recent Plan C Festival in Britain, these and similar dilemmas were posed by movement organizations themselves.¹¹ One, if the “municipal” scale is where directional demands should be made, then who are demands made to? And who makes these demands? Another: where and how do those who don’t live in towns or cities fit into a political strategy that focuses on the municipality? If we accept there is a huge danger in fetishizing “the local”, then how does a municipal strategy resist falling into localism? How does a municipal strategy go beyond the nation-state?

The Symbiosis Research Collective helpfully warns against “a toxic strain of localism” where self-described localist movements win elections with racist and fascist platforms. In Italy, for example, right-wing movements like the Lega Nord have even adopted the conventional leftist, anti-authoritarian language of “autonomy” and “direct democracy” to describe their desire for “self” determination where the “self” necessarily

¹¹ Russell, Bertie. 2017. “Radical Municipalism: Demanding the Future” in *OpenDemocracy*

excludes brown people and immigrants. Symbiosis call this “dark municipalism”¹² and advocate the development of strategies for addressing and combating these tendencies. To address this, they make several proposals, including “actively undoing bigotry through organising itself, building connections beyond the local into our political project, and developing a grassroots political system around the principles of democracy and interdependence over autonomy and local control.”

Another question that is not easily answered by the movements is if the dual power institutions are simply an extension of the nation-state, or if it’s possible that they are qualitatively different in terms of what they can do and how they are positioned. Can we make qualitatively different institutions at these scales? Also, how does “occupying the squares” and “occupying the institutions” work in tandem? Can we take existing institutions without being institutionalized? Do we even need to take existing institutions? Given the ways municipal institutions are currently limited by nation-states – both financially and legally – is it possible to produce new ways of building our capacity to act? How can we develop resources and the ability to use them without and irrespective of the nation-state? Can we build degrees of autonomy from the nation-state? How could it be possible for municipalities to seriously disobey the nation-state without being crushed?

The latter question looms especially large for those living nation-states born out of a dual crushing called genocide and slavery, such as the United States project. Recent writings address this reality more critically, writing that municipalism on Turtle Island necessitates honesty, confrontation, and engagement with colonial and imperial histories.¹³

While the United States and Canada have seen a surge of mobilization and interest in left-wing politics and municipalists from movements abroad, a municipalist emergence in these geographies has yet to occur.¹⁴ To organize in these countries means to grapple with problems at a civilizational scale.

The municipalist movements in Barcelona and Madrid offer influential contributions in political theory (in light of history) as well as practical solutions to current problems

¹² Symbiosis Research Collective. 2018. “Dark Municipalism: the dangers of local politics.” In *The Ecologist*.

¹³ Finley, Eleanor and Aaron Vansintjan. 2021. “Lay of the Land: Radical Municipalism in the US and Canada” MINIM Municipalism Observatory.

¹⁴ Finley, Eleanor and Aaron Vansintjan. 2021. “Where Are the Municipalities in the US and Canada?” MINIM Municipalism Observatory.

posed by capitalism.¹⁵ Marx, Arendt, Gramsci, and Alinsky are among thinkers who are reviewed here in an effort to learn from what has worked, as well as what needs to be reassessed to achieve more direct democracy in society. Community Land Trusts (CLTs) and neighborhood councils are examples of solutions increasingly presented as ways in which practical change can occur within the current power structure.

Municipalism, in effect, seeks to define the institutional contours of a new society even as it advances the practical message of a radically new politics for our day.” Its libertarian spirit separates statecraft (what we think of as “politics”, such as the professional body of bureaucrats, police, military, legislators) from the politics of pre-capitalist democratic communities. New politics must be structured institutionally around restoring power by municipalities. Libertarian municipalism premises on the struggle to achieve a rational and ecological society, which depends on education and organization. It presupposes a genuine democratic interest in stopping the growing powers of the nation state and reclaiming them for the community and region.

Concluding thoughts

We have come away from our research with some answers and many more questions about ecology, abolition, security culture, technology, and strategies. Many dilemmas also remain about how municipalism can consciously respect other ways of being, and the degree to which a municipalist movement must necessarily be pluralistic and perhaps often not called “municipalism” at all. For example, the movement demands a return to Greek understanding of polis, meaning direct face-to-face assemblies of the people in the formulation of public policy. In invoking such a historical example, what are our assumptions we invoke about the nature of time and space? What exactly do we mean by power, freedom, difference? The Zapatistas have famously called for a world “in which many worlds fit”. In doing so, they invite us, even those within liberatory movements, to question even some of our most deeply cherished assumptions, to think on the scale of the nature of the universe and human beings’ place in it.

¹⁵ Symbiosis Research Collective. 2017. “Community, Democracy, Mutual Aid: Toward a Dual Power and Beyond”.

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