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Spain's municipalist parties suffered a major setback at the May elections — their own actions and inactions are largely to blame for the loss of support.

On May 26, citizens across Spain went to the polls to vote in municipal and European elections. The results were widely seen as a setback to the municipalist wave that swept Spain's major cities four years prior. Carlos Delclós published one explanation[1], focusing on the gap between their hype and their policies and how the Catalan independence movement has upset the landscape. To put it simply, parliamentary majorities are now all but impossible, given that the divide between Left and Right has been further divided by a perpendicular axis, the one between Spanish nationalism and Catalan nationalism.

There are, however, a whole series of failings that stem from the actual programs and interventions of the municipalist parties. Weeks of wrangling to turn the divided vote into feasible coalitions has given us even more examples of politics as usual in the last month, and I think we are obliged to take an honest look at the four years the *governments of change* have been in power. Delclós has mentioned some accomplishments; I will focus on failings.

Admittedly, this is not the whole picture, but the problems I bring up are grave enough to warrant a serious reconsideration of the parties I discuss, and electoral strategies in general. I will focus on the experiences in Barcelona and to a lesser extent València, being the two cities I know best, as well as two primary examples in which the municipalist platforms that

[1] roarmag.org

seized City Hall four years ago were the creations of grassroots activists more than career politicians.

Interpreting the Elections

First, a word on the context. The Catalan independence movement has certainly shaken up politics in the Spanish state, but I do not think “nationalism” explains the waning fortunes of the municipalist wave. Rather, the actions and inactions of the municipalist parties themselves explain their loss of support.

In the increasingly polarized environment that accompanied the explosion of Spanish nationalism and the brutal government assault on voters in the October 2017 independence referendum, Podemos and Barcelona en Comú came off as crass opportunists.

Supporters of independence were livid with the ways the BComú mayor, Ada Colau, sabotaged the 2017 referendum. How could a municipalist be anything but enthusiastic in response to a popular referendum? It seemed a calculated political move, given that Podemos was hoping to get into power in part by positioning themselves as middle-of-the-road mediators with regards to Catalonia, something they could not do if independence were achieved before the next elections. Meanwhile, Spanish nationalists from the Socialists all the way to Vox despise Podemos and BComú for not taking an iron-fisted approach to the independence movement.

The other municipalist party, the CUP, lost all their seats in Barcelona, showing that unwavering support for independence was also not a sure strategy. The CUP is the only

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party I know about that functions in an internally democratic, assembly-driven manner and the only one with a nominally anticapitalist politics. As such, their fate is even more relevant to those interested in municipalist strategies. At the mercy of parliamentary politics — designed over centuries with the express aim of neutralizing any radical threat from below — they had to make compromises[2] to enter a governing coalition. They staked everything on the independence process, joining with centrist, Catalan nationalist parties in the hopes that in a pie-in-the-sky future of an independent Catalonia, they could achieve a progressive, anti-austerity government. To get there, they had to support the pro-austerity budgets of their larger allies.

In the end, they alienated Spanish-speaking progressives, and they lost the interest of Catalan-speaking progressives who figured they might as well vote for the center-left ERC, which was actually sticking to its program. Ironically, the passive, media-driven tactics favored by the CUP's larger allies condemned the independence movement to failure. The CUP hedged their bets and lost on both fronts.

But independence was not the major issue in the municipal elections — at least, not for everybody. Many voters favored independence parties in the European elections and non-independence parties in the municipals. So what went wrong for the municipalists?

Consider this statistic: 60 percent of Barcelona residents feel that the city has gotten worse in the last four years. That figure is far worse than it was with the previous incumbent

[2] roarmag.org

who lost the mayoral elections, and by necessity it does not count the growing number of people who have had to leave Barcelona due to rising rents.

In a seeming reversal of fortunes, Ada Colau recently managed to secure another term as mayor after weeks of wrangling, even though her party narrowly lost the vote. Instead of seeing this as a new lease on life for the municipalist movement, we need to interpret it as a deeper, more ominous kind of failure. She got the support necessary to stay in power by teaming up with the Socialists. The price she had to pay for that alliance was to refuse any coalition with pro-independence parties, such as the leftwing ERC that actually came in first in the mayoral elections.

There will doubtlessly be a heftier price to pay down the road, given that the Socialists were the first party of austerity in Spain, and that position hasn't changed. Even more frightening, though: Colau could only hold onto power by accepting the outside support of the rightwing Ciudadanos (Citizens), headed in Barcelona by the rabidly racist Manuel Valls.

A Machine That Cannot be Tamed

One of the principal anarchist arguments against the strategy of seizing political power — a strategy that comes back again and again, ever in new disguises, always to disastrous results — is that the mechanisms of political power are designed to exploit, control, and oppress, and they cannot be used for other purposes, no matter how good our intentions might be. A convincing reading can be made of Ada Colau's good inten-

course and recruitment drives. Only by focusing on the single thing we all truly share — the need to survive in spite of the brutality of capitalism — could we have broken with those artificial barriers.

This was a general failing, but it is of specific concern to anarchists, autonomous marxists and other anticapitalists, since we are the ones who spend all our time thinking about concepts like mutual aid and communalization. I am not at all surprised by the many failings of the municipalist parties in power, since political parties have given us no other example in all their history.

What is surprising is our failure to spread deeper practices of self-organization, or even to imagine such practices for ourselves, in a moment when tens thousands of people were rejecting representational politics and open to other ways of doing things.

Though I am critical of municipalism as a strategy, I think it is possible to find common ground within those structures that allow people to fight for housing, to defend their neighborhoods, and to protect their livelihood, as long as such structures preserve their autonomy from the institutions of power and the electoral vagaries of a politics that is by definition bourgeois.

Ours cannot be a political struggle, it must be deeper, it must be social, fusing our economic struggles for a life free of precarity and exploitation with the collective re-expropriation of the power to organize our lives for ourselves, without representatives or rulers.

No, these parties were born[7] in the vacuum left behind after the 15M movement died. And it died because we were unable to elaborate our spaces of self-organization to the point where they could take on the self-organization of daily life.

They remained *political* spaces rather than *social* spaces, concerned exclusively with the organization of protests, blockades, strikes, and events. Without a doubt, protests, blockades, and strikes are important, but they are not enough to make a revolution. Even in Barcelona, where the 15M movement matured the most, leaving behind the massive, central plaza occupation — that clunky, disillusioning experiment in direct democracy — and morphed into a versatile, rhizomatic complex of dozens of neighborhood assemblies,[8] we failed to go further.

In those neighborhood assemblies, we began to construct truly social relations, but we did not use those relations to launch practices of mutual aid and expropriation of the social wealth. In only a few cases did the assemblies link up with the housing struggle, generally leaving that to specific, single-issue groups, only occasionally did they open up the metro for free public transport, and as far as I know, never did they break merrily into supermarkets to fill up carts and share the abundance with neighbors struggling to make it to the end of the month. Rather, they focused on protests, opposition to austerity measures, and getting people in the streets, a task made difficult by our pre-existing political identities.

In the realm of symbolic protest, those identities become more entrenched, as each little group perfects its own dis-

[7] crimethinc.com

[8] www.counterpunch.org

tions thwarted by political and economic institutions too powerful for any election to overturn.

However, in every case, it is extremely difficult to find any evidence of a real attempt to create some kind of revolutionary transformation.

Take the case of the high voter discontent in Barcelona. The capitalist media and the police unions — powerful forces in any democracy — conspired to channel this discontent towards largely illusory fears of rising crime. Colau did not challenge this discourse frontally, uncovering its racist subtext nor emphasizing the kinds of capitalist violence that do far more harm. On the contrary, she joined the tough-on-crime chorus, promising to add more than a thousand new cops to the streets, but promising a focus on “community policing,” a scam that any neighborhood activist knows is intimately linked to the intensification of police violence.[3] The CUP were the only party not to promise more cops, and they tanked in the elections.

This is par for the course. In the last elections, Colau promised to abolish the riot division of the city police, and in the end all she did was change their name. In effect, she pissed the cops off and mobilized them against her administration without weakening them institutionally.

One of the first campaigns the police and the media waged against the Colau administration was to manufacture a crisis with the *manters*, undocumented immigrants primarily from sub-Saharan Africa who make their living selling goods like clothing or sunglasses in public areas without permission. The cops fanned the flames through increased harassment

[3] www.goodreads.com

and the media created racist fears and annoyances around these vendors, but Colau's solution was insubstantial dialogue ending in a further crackdown on the immigrants.

This is especially significant given that the *manters*, politically organized in a union, are at the forefront in the battle against racism and the border regime. Their conclusion to the experience with the municipalist government was to label Colau as "racist".

The Loss of Autonomy

From the beginning, feminism has been one of Ada Colau's major campaign issues. Without a doubt, this has given basic feminist discourses more mainstream attention, a change that shouldn't be belittled. But it is necessary to point out that there is currently something of a war going on in the heart of the feminist movement, and the LGBT movement as well, concerning core beliefs and strategies.

One wing seeks integration and equality within the existing institutions, the other identifies those institutions as patriarchal to their core and seeks a deeper transformation of society on every level. The former, which Colau faithfully represents, tends to control the resources and access to public discourse.

Take the example of the March 8 *Vaga de totes* or "Women's Strike." Advancing an economic, anticapitalist critique of patriarchy that is relevant to poor and working class women and anathema to wealthy women or those with positions of institutional power, and reclaiming March 8 as a combative day of

breaking and slander against transportation workers, as denounced by the CGT.

Perhaps most worrisome, her party has become the vanguard of the "Smart City" model, which is the future of the capitalist city. On a world scale, Barcelona has become a leading Smart City, advancing rational and AI integration of urban management, total surveillance, and completely illusory "green" measures that have completely hoodwinked reformist sectors of the environmental movement, while also attracting additional high tech investment that is helping push out poorer city residents.

The Failings of Self-Organization

If I have avoided discussion of the municipalist parties' accomplishments with the justification that for now I would only focus on critique, it would be wholly unfair of me to avoid self-critique.

Without a doubt, this latest attempt to engage in a "long march through the institutions" has been fueled by the failings of anti-institutional movements that focus on self-organization. After all, Podemos and many of the affiliated municipal parties were not born as a co-optation of the 15M movement. Many would-be politicians tried, but the people were sick of political parties and they were armed with the historical memory of how consistently political parties had failed us in the past, so they were able to defend their rejection of parties throughout the duration of the movement.

work designed to satisfy both tourism and the trade fairs that had become a major source of investment for the city.

Neighborhood assemblies, the PAH, and the CGT — an anarcho-syndicalist union, and the third largest labor organization in the country — all denounced the effect mass tourism was having on housing availability and quality of life in the neighborhoods. Transport workers organized by the CGT, bearing the brunt of the huge influx of visitors to the city, were fighting for more resources and better labor conditions. And a number of assemblies were popping up to denounce political blacklists and labor precarity at the Mobile World Congress, the crown jewel of Barcelona's trade fairs.

From the beginning, BComú has positioned themselves as the guardians of Barcelona's economic future. As I predicted[6] in the article I wrote at the beginning of Ada Colau's term, her party would take limited measures against mass tourism, which conflicts with the new model of tech-sector work-tourism; and that she would fight to continuously update the dominant model of tourism and gentrification being deployed by the city's elite.

In practice, her measures against mass tourism have been disappointing even to the reformist organizations that once constituted her base, consisting mainly of slowing down a rampant hotel construction that was threatening to destroy the integrity of the city as a well functioning capitalist whole; basically, playing the urban planning role that capitalists require governments to execute. From the very beginning she enthusiastically promoted a renewed contract for the Mobile World Congress and shielded that entity from criticism. She has engaged in strike-

[6] roarmag.org

struggle akin to May Day was the project of a small group of feminists.

In Barcelona, they were overwhelmingly anarchists or members of the pro-independence Left. These were comrades who faced frequent fines and police harassment for blocking ultra-Catholic anti-abortion activists or for carrying out unpermitted marches against gender violence. In earlier iterations of March 8, when the Women's Strike was exclusively the initiative of a relatively small assembly, they would block major roads, sometimes numbering only fifty, while furious drivers wondered what the hell they were doing, unaware of the significance of March 8.

This past March 8, a number of feminist comrades spoke of how confused they felt after the protests. Now that several major political parties, including BComú, backed the event, the streets were filled with tens of thousands of protesters, and my friends were happy with the amount of power in the streets, with the fact that finally, all of society was listening. But at the same time, they felt like the movement had been stolen away from them and was being used by those who had a much more limited, reformist agenda. In effect, March 8 had been defanged and turned into a parade, in a way similar to what has already happened to Pride.

In Manresa, a small city outside Barcelona where the feminist movement is particularly strong, an early morning women's march maintained a large crowd in the streets while they smashed the windows of misogynist fashion stores and blockaded a factory known for the exploitation of its overwhelmingly female workers. They were able to do this not

thanks to all the mainstream support now given to the March 8 protest, but in spite of it. The morning march was organized as an autonomous event, separate from the institutional protest, where movement police prevented the very kind of direct action and direct propaganda — like spraypainting — that gave the earlier movement its strength.

Another example comes from the housing movement, Colau's key constituency from her activist days. With the bursting of the real estate bubble and the financial crisis, the *Plataforma de Afectados por las Hipotecas* — Platform of those Affected by Mortgages or PAH — exploded on the scene and began to undergo a major transformation.

While in its beginnings, the organization refused to help renters who were also being kicked out of their housing, as the crisis deepened so too did the practices and perspectives of the PAH. The immigrant families that increasingly made up the organization brought to bear a consciousness of racism and border regimes. They also ended their exclusive focus on mortgages, embracing everyone with housing problems, and as they begin squatting entire buildings to provide collective housing, often working hand in hand with squatter and anarchist groups who had been promoting this tactic for decades, they began to address more of the problems facing the poor, such as patriarchy and educational exclusion.

Relationships of solidarity formed within the PAH led to some of the first major interracial, intergenerational, and lower class feminist assemblies ever created in several areas, to "popular schools" that would give after school assistance to the children of families that suffered the violent exclusions of

Meanwhile, burn-out, an increase in differentiated forms of repression, and the kind of complacency that often besets autonomous subcultures eroded active solidarity and joint struggle between radical squatters and *gitanos*. The neighborhood was punctured by Airbnb's, tattoo and bicycle shops, and vegan restaurants, and plans were developed for an "international" private university catering to North American students.

In four years, a progressive government accomplished what a rightwing one had been incapable of over two decades. So when I hear people laud Joan Ribó for the bicycle lanes and widened sidewalks, I can tell that they've never been to the frontlines of a struggle against gentrification, or they've never seen with the eyes of those who are excluded from, rather than those who are welcomed to, the newly beautified neighborhood, because the last few years in el Cabanyal made it clear that the bike lanes go hand in hand with the evictions, the racist police raids, and the wholesale expropriation of the neighborhood by investment capital and whiter, more Nordic residents.

If the government beautifies a neighborhood, it is precisely because they do not intend for the poorer residents to be able to stick around and enjoy it. And this holds true whether the government is rightwing or leftwing.

Ada Colau's tenure in Barcelona provides a more complex example of the same dynamic. When she assumed the reins of government, some of the major struggles regarding quality of life and a "right to the city" focused on runaway tourism and the hyper-precarious labor model based on services and temp-

València, now armed with historical perspective after witnessing the total gentrification of other neighborhoods closer to the center.

Rita's planned demolition united the entire neighborhood, breaking racial and class divides and uniting anarchists, relatively conservative or apolitical neighbors, and *gitanos* active in the collective self-defense of their communities. People defended squatted housing, occupied vacant lots to create community gardens and sporting fields open to local youth (in contrast to the private and exclusively white tennis courts nearby), founded new social centers, organized huge public events like *paellas* and *calçotades*, and built solidarity.

Rita, the mafiosa mayor who ruled with an iron grip, was defeated.

Then Joan Ribó of Compromís came into power. He canceled the demolition project and immediately embarked on a smart campaign of gentrification that paired beautification and investment with evictions, police harassment, and a racist and anti-squatter media smear campaign. The press built up the non-*gitano* squatters as a separate identity and heaped all manner of calumnies on them as a group, portraying them as privileged parasites and professional troublemakers (Alex Jones, anyone?), while demonizing racialized neighbors as devious criminals.

When the lower-middle class residents — those who owned their houses, however modest and run-down these were — realized they could be catapulted into the upper-middle class if property values rose, they broke with the coalition that had defeated the previous government.

poverty, housing precarity, and racism, and more. Some PAH chapters even changed their name to PAHC, to reflect that they were also affected by the big C, Capitalism.

But as the PAH grew and radicalized, it became ever more distanced from its most famous activist turned politician. Most chapters are now staunchly critical of Podemos and the municipalist *governments of change* it allies with. In Barcelona, the PAH is largely recognized as a fief of BComú, a fact that led the "Obra Social," the part of the organization that occupies buildings and puts them to social use, to break away.

Meanwhile, BComú and the other *governments of change* get the credit for "expanding the public housing stock" when in reality, this is an achievement of the PAH and similar grassroots groups, who occupy unused buildings and fight banks tooth and nail to force them to make their repossessed properties available for housing.

Focusing on the achievements of government tends to obscure the kind of qualitative changes people actually seek. While people in the streets are fighting for their quality of life, politicians tout their credentials with statistics and media campaigns. They might boast of thousands of new units of public housing, but the reality is far too complex to be expressed in statistics.

I live in a neighborhood where the two major apartment blocks are slated for demolition, a plan approved by the CUP (Podemos-affiliated parties are not a significant part of the picture in my district). Recently we held an event that was well attended by members of the local PAH. One, a single mother of five, told me about how, after a years-long wait, the hous-

ing authority offered her public housing that was completely uninhabitable, with no water, no electricity, and even missing portions of the roof. If she were to turn down the housing they offered, she would exclude herself from the possibility of future assistance. Needless to say, that housing unit was one of the choice examples that banks were handing over to the government to comply with the new laws.

What not many people know is that, as an activist, Ada Colau would often undermine the autonomy of social movements. In the previous decade, she was part of an organization that arose within the Barcelona squatting movement and began to push a strategy of negotiating with City Hall, occupying spaces and then legalizing them, getting the government to expropriate in exchange for ceding use of the space.

After Colau's group effectively pushed out the members of their shared social center, Magdalenes, who were opposed to the strategy of legalization, the Barcelona Squatters' Assembly expelled the Magdalenes collective, not out of vindictiveness, but to protect the autonomy of the movement. They had a clear memory of how legalization was key to destroying the squatters' movements of Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, and I think history has validated this decision.

The Barcelona squatters' movement still enjoys its autonomy, still generates powerful struggles[4], and has also engaged in a fruitful cross-pollination with the PAH and similar groups.

A more sordid example comes in the form of Jaume Assens, "third lieutenant" to the mayor and deputy for En Comú Podem,

[4] en.squat.net

the Podemos-BComú alliance. Before his election on Ada Colau's ticket, he was well known as one of the principal lawyers for the Barcelona squatters' movement. In his very first week upon assuming office, he was already signing eviction orders against families that needed to squat in order to get housing. The new administration, at that time, was careful not to evict social centers or squats connected to a political movement, which meant that unconnected immigrant or *gitano* families were the most vulnerable.

Capitalism by Other Means

My strongest criticism of the *governments of change* focuses on the way they have actually been at the forefront of intelligent capitalist expansion. This is exceedingly clear in València, governed since 2015 by the party Compromís, which formed as a coalition of leftwing parties and activist platforms to run in the municipal elections shortly after the start of the 15M (or *indignados*) movement.[5]

For the previous decades, València had been the fief of the traditional rightwing Popular Party, under the leadership of the notoriously corrupt and authoritarian Rita Barberà. One of her pet projects was the wholesale demolition of el Cabanyal, a fishing village turned seafront neighborhood populated by *gitanos*, *Rroma*, and poor to lower-middle class white folks. As the neighborhood was progressively abandoned, it also become a focal point for the anarchist squatting movement in

[5] crimethinc.com