

Call for Papers

Municipalist strategy in crisis?

An *Urban Studies* special issue

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In response to the 2007-9 global financial crisis and the ensuing period of fiscal austerity, we have seen an upsurge in political resistance and experimentation with alternatives, notably the urban occupations of 2011 – the ‘movements of the squares’ – creating a groundswell for the global ‘new municipalist’ movement, spearheaded by Spanish citizen platforms such as Barcelona en Comú and Ahora Madrid (Blanco, Salazar, & Bianchi, 2019; Janoschka & Mota, 2020; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). At the same time, we have witnessed, as part of a general turn towards ‘municipal statecraft’ (Lauermann, 2018), a parallel resurgence in forms of municipalism treading more familiar ground – from ‘entrepreneurial’ (Thompson, Nowak, Southern, & Davies, 2019) and ‘pragmatic’ (Aldag, Kim, & Warner, 2019) municipalisms to ‘financialised municipal entrepreneurialism’ (Beswick & Penny, 2018), all made variously in response to the crisis conditions of austerity urbanism (Bayırbağ, Davies, & Münch, 2017).

Setting so-called ‘new’ municipalism apart, however, from these technocratic strategies of municipal governance is a distinctive theory of change which begins with citizen-led collective action – rooted in a ‘politics of proximity’ (Russell, 2019) and the ‘urban everyday’ (Beveridge & Koch, 2019) – and which seeks to transform the state. Various adopting a ‘dual power’ approach, these initiatives look to transform existing state institutions ‘from the inside’, focusing not solely on the function but also the form of the state itself, pursuing the ‘feminization’ of decision-making processes, and the scaling up of forms of participatory and economic democracy, such as communes, assemblies, co-operatives and digital platforms (Thompson, 2020). New municipalists make the relatively novel move in anti-statist, anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, feminist and pro-democracy strategies of taking the struggle from ‘occupying the squares’ to ‘occupying the institutions’, thereby blurring the boundaries between state and civil society and prefiguring an emergent politics of scale that challenges conventional hierarchical interpretations, and decentres-without-jettisoning the state in theories of social change – acting to ‘prefigure’ (Cooper, 2017, 2020) or ‘reimagine’ the state (Cooper, Dhawan, & Newman, 2019) rather than reject it outright.

Following half a decade of initiatives claiming the ‘new municipalist’ moniker – during which the movement has consolidated itself through transnational networks such as Fearless Cities, international database and mapping initiatives such as the Municipalist Observatory, the Atlas of Utopias and Transformative Cities, and new media platforms dedicated to documenting developments, not least Minim[\[3\]](#) – now is an opportune moment to critically assess the experiences and achievements of these movements and their contribution to critical urban theory. Building on recent interventions in the still embryonic field of new municipalist research – on scalar strategy (Russell, 2019, 2020), on historical development (Thompson, 2020) and on governance transformation (Blanco et al., 2019; Janoschka & Mota, 2020) – this special issue in *Urban Studies* is the first academic collection of its kind and invites papers that explore the operation, pitfalls and potentials of new municipalism in terms of two salient themes: strategic approach and crisis dynamics.

First, we are interested in understanding the import of scaled strategies for transformative social change and welcome papers that pose questions around the logic, novelty, efficacy and viability of municipalist strategy and action. From urban planning to food production, energy systems to economic democracy, proponents of municipalism have staked a claim to intervene ‘differently’ into a wealth of areas that are a perennial focus of critical urban studies. But how distinct are

these municipalist initiatives from related trends in ‘remunicipalisation’ of public goods and services (Cumbers & Becker, 2018; McDonald, 2018) with deeper roots in traditions of municipal socialism (Cumbers, 2012; Leopold & McDonald, 2012)? And how novel are municipalist projects in relation to the anti-neoliberal and post-capitalist urban struggles of the past three decades, from ‘insurgent’ and ‘guerrilla’ urbanism (Iveson, 2013) to claiming the right to the city and urban commoning (Cumbers, 2015)?

Second, we are interested in the relationship between municipalism and ‘crisis’ – a condition marking the tumultuous present and one which radically alters our perception of temporality and historical change (Knight & Stewart, 2016). Municipalist initiatives have sprung up in direct reaction to crisis conditions in national politics and in urban governance (Davies & Blanco, 2017). In what sense do municipalist strategies hinge on the notion of crisis – from that of austerity urbanism (Bayırbağ et al., 2017) and of social reproduction or the ‘crisis of care’ (Lombardozi & Pitts, 2019) to that of the state and of capitalism more broadly and the multi-faceted ecological crisis threatening life on this planet? How do dialectical dynamics between national politics and municipalist strategy play out across different contexts? For instance, London’s experiments in radical municipal socialism in the 1930s and 1980s, and tentatively the 2020s, were direct responses to catastrophic national defeats of the left wing of the Labour Party (Hatherley, 2020). Municipalist movements have often been built as Gramscian counter-hegemonic historic blocs working in concert with allies at other scales of the state, notably left-populist parties such as Podemos (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). What does the defeat or co-optation of ‘left-populism’ (Dyer-Witthford, 2020) mean for municipalist politics? Most recently, the coronavirus pandemic threatens to throw into crisis the future of new municipalism – a movement arguably dependent on urban encounter and spatial centrality (Thompson, 2020). What does the current crisis caused by covid-19 mean for municipalist politics? How is this extreme moment of crisis currently shaping – or likely to shape – conditions for municipalism, such as in the breakthrough for eco-socialist and citizen movement candidates in the French municipal elections of June 2020, partly postponed by the pandemic[\[4\]](#)?

For this special issue on *municipalist strategy in crisis* we welcome papers which connect an analysis of crisis dynamics with implications for new municipalist political strategy and its distinctive theory of change. We are interested in questions such as, but not exclusively:

- What – if anything – marks new municipalism as distinctive in the practical terms of organising and implementation?
- How have municipalists sought to intervene in the course of prevailing neoliberal trajectories, and what limits to these strategies can be inferred?
- How are municipalist strategies shaped by crisis conditions – economic, ecological, epidemiological?
- How do municipalist experiments respond to crises and, in doing so, how successful have they been?
- How is the experience of crisis built into municipalist logics of action?
- How might our understanding of this relationship with crisis change our approach to municipalist strategy in the future?
- How have experiences of temporality – in relation to the urgency and exceptionality of crisis – affected the strategic orientation of new municipalism and its assessment of limits?

Timeline and Process

This is an initial call for abstract submissions in preparation for a special issue proposal to *Urban Studies*. In response to the journal’s open invitation to submit proposals for prospective theme issues, we have already had preliminary discussions with the editorial team and, following a positive initial review, we are aiming to submit a full proposal later this year.

- **October 15th 2020:** closing date for one-page paper proposal abstract submission
- October 30th 2020: authors informed of inclusion; special issue outline submitted to Urban Studies for final review
- March 29th 2021: prospective deadline for full paper submission
- September 2021: estimated completion of peer review

If you are interested in being a part of this project, please send your abstract of no more than one page to matthew.thompson@liverpool.ac.uk, b.russell@sheffield.ac.uk and laura@minim-municipalism.org, by October 15th 2020. Abstracts will be reviewed by us and those successful will be invited to submit full papers for peer review under Urban Studies' usual guidelines. Whilst Urban Studies is an exclusively English-language journal, we recognise the importance of supporting authors where English is not a first language.

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[1] <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/humanities-and-social-sciences/staff/matthew-william-thompson/>

[2] <https://urbaninstitute.group.shef.ac.uk/who-we-are/dr-bertie-russell/>

[3] <http://www.communicationchange.net/en/laura-roth/>

[4] www.minim-municipalism.org/

[5] <https://commonspolis.org/en/blog-en/2020-cities-elections-france-a-green-wave-and-a-citizen-slap-in-the-face/>