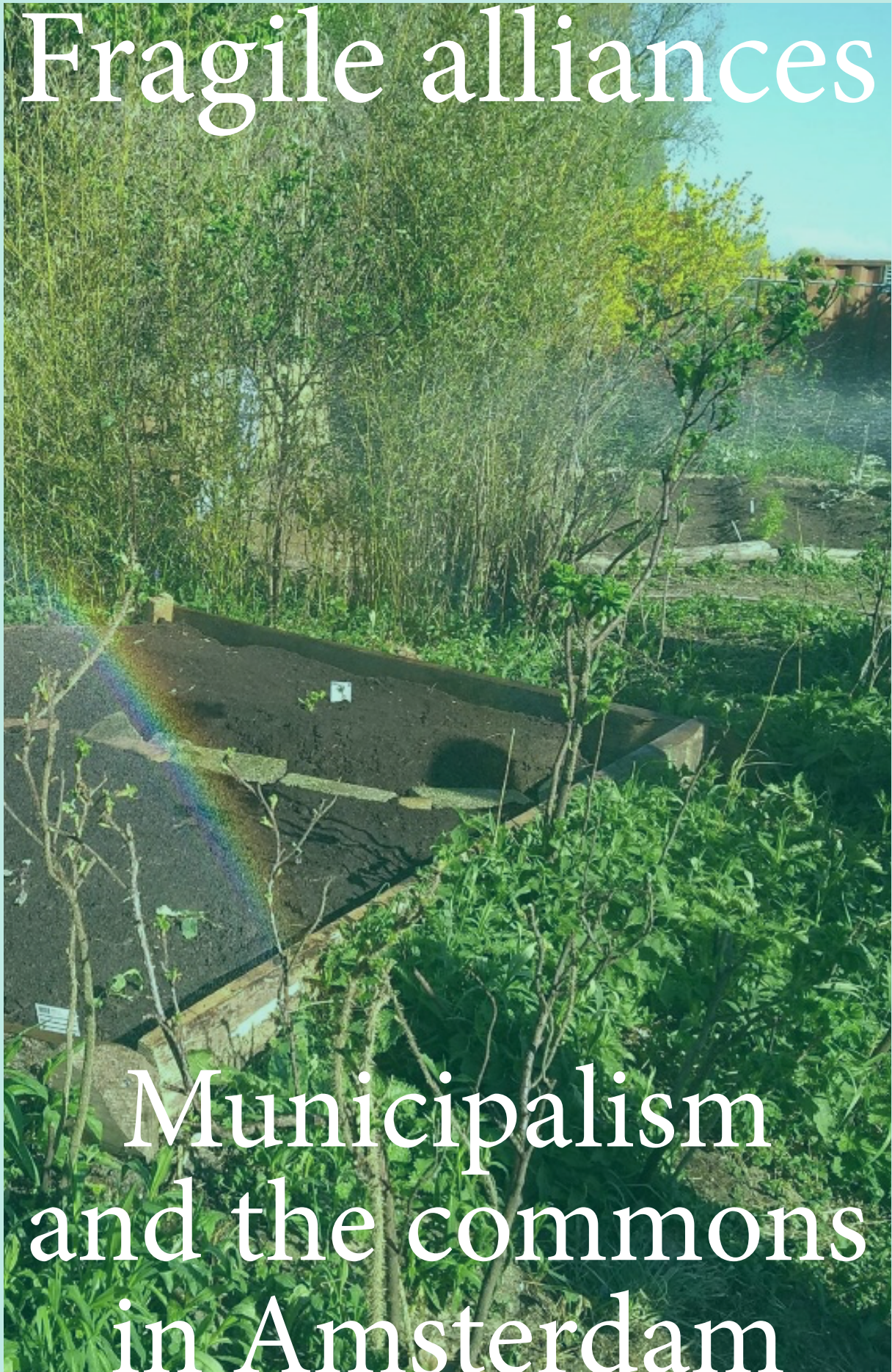


MINIM REPORT N.V | MAY 2021 |

# Fragile alliances



## Municipalism and the commons in Amsterdam

Imogen Hamilton-Jones | Thomas de Groot



Minim is a municipalist observatory that amplifies the voice of municipalism by sharing practical and theoretical knowledge with the support of a community of activists, scholars, journalists, and public officials.

[Imogen Hamilton-Jones](#) is an urban anthropologist and research fellow at Centre for Urban Studies, University of Amsterdam, working in a team researching municipalism. Her background includes London policy research, commons activism in Paris and Naples, and academic research on the urban commons.

[Thomas de Groot](#) is a writer, organizer and political advisor from Amsterdam. As Head of Programmes at [Commons Network](#), he works with social movements, government agencies and cities to transform the system and shape a caring, just and post-capitalist future.

© 2021. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons 4.0 license



Photo credits: Mahatma Gandhi Plantsoen



## Table of contents

New vocabularies in Amsterdam's municipality	3
Theoretical allies: municipalism and the commons	4
Commoning in Amsterdam: Facing up to the "scale problem"	6
Municipalism in Amsterdam: Fragile alliances	7
"In practice, it's damned difficult": Building trust across scales	7
"Well, thanks for all the attention, but I'm not going to speak everywhere": inclusive participation across scales	10
"Blueprints of the future?": Expanding in time as well as in space	11
Conclusion: municipalism and the commons allies in Amsterdam?	13
Recommendations: expanding the commons through municipalism in Amsterdam	15
Bibliography	16

# FRAGILE ALLIANCES

## MUNICIPALISM AND THE COMMONS IN AMSTERDAM

I used to be part of the squat movement when it was big – not now, but when it was big [...] It was like thousands, thousands of people and many squats everywhere and solidarity networks [...] And there were debates and movies and a lot of things going on then that are part of movement building and maintaining, and [...] discussing ideas. And so that's... not fully, but for a large part, that's been killed.

Marly<sup>1</sup> is videocalling me from her office at the Amsterdam municipality. I can see lines of files stacked behind her in the rectangle of space marked out by the camera. She leans heavily on her forearms as she describes how the political life of Amsterdam has changed in recent decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, alongside vibrant student and minority rights movements, “squatters like really owned whole neighbourhoods”, claiming space throughout the heart of the city for political organising and debate. Now, these same neighbourhoods are overwhelmingly dominated by Amsterdam’s booming real estate and tourism markets; citizens’ efforts to reclaim the city from these forces in the twenty-first century have been generally slight and marginalised. In the appraisal of Dutch historian Tim Verlaan, “[i]t seems as if Amsterdam has forgotten that a hard battle was once fought to defend [...] the city as] an affordable place to live, work and enjoy leisure time” (139: 2016).

Marly’s story of the waning political engagement of Amsterdam’s population is reflected in the tales of activists I’ve met in social centres, housing cooperatives and community gardens here. Joost, a community organiser in the west of the city, agrees that “[t]here has been something strange [going on] for the last forty years in Amsterdam”. He blames creeping disengagement with politics on “neoliberalism [...] – everything now is run like a business, [...] citizens are turned into customers” who complain about services from the local government, rather than mobilising collectively to change the city.

Critiques of the depoliticisation of Amsterdam’s civil society have long been voiced by activists

---

<sup>1</sup> All interviewees anonymised, except in instances when participants requested that we use their real names.



and academics<sup>2</sup>, but Marly is speaking from a more unusual position: as an employee of Amsterdam's local government. Marly tells me about a new team in the municipality which has been tasked with developing Amsterdam's Fearless City Programme and bringing the emergent international movement of new municipalism<sup>3</sup> to Amsterdam. Enthused by municipalist developments in cities like Barcelona and Naples, some Amsterdam policymakers are tentatively exploring political concepts like "municipalism" and "the commons", familiarising themselves with terms which have until now been rarely heard in Amsterdam. The Fearless City Programme, equipped with these concepts and case studies, aims to drive social change in partnership with local people and activists, working, inspired by Podemos, with "one foot in the institutions and a thousand feet in the streets."

However, in comparison with oft-cited exemplary cases of new municipalism, the political life of Amsterdam's streets and neighbourhoods is muted. In the contemporary context of Amsterdam's largely depoliticised civil society, the task of building alliances with "a thousand feet in the street" is daunting. Although generations of activists and neighbourhood organisers have been practicing commoning and pursuing values of municipalism against the odds in Amsterdam's increasingly hostile landscape for political organising, terms like "municipalism" or "the commons" are seldom recognised in Amsterdam civil society. In this context, what has been the effect of the recent arrival of new municipalist political concepts in the municipality? How can a nascent emphasis on municipalism in institutional politics empower existing and new initiatives working to re-politicise Amsterdam?

This report<sup>4</sup> explores these questions, first by assessing Amsterdam municipality's current explorations of the terms "municipalism" and the "commons", in relation to the theoretical synergy between the two concepts and the challenges of putting them into practice on the ground in Amsterdam. In a city like Amsterdam, largely depoliticised and dominated by the interests of capital, commons are precarious; the new municipalist emphasis in the municipality signals an opportunity for the local state to become an ally to the commons, a partner, working to protect, develop and expand the commons across scales. How far the municipality will deliver on the promises of its new vocabulary remains an open question. After assessing three core challenges

---

2 See, for example, Uitermark, J., & Nicholls, W. (2014).

3 See Thompson (2020) for an introduction to new municipalism.

4 This report has been written by Imogen Hamilton-Jones in collaboration with Thomas de Groot; we are deeply grateful to all the activists and policymakers who made time to speak with us. We would also like to thank Minim, as well as the team working on municipalism at the University of Amsterdam, primarily Professor Justus Uitermark, Daglar Tasci and James Steijger, and the Commons Network, for many fruitful conversations which fed into this report.

facing municipalism in Amsterdam we conclude by evaluating the terms “municipalism” and “commons” as alliance building tools, perhaps able to re-politicise the city by setting in motion concrete experiments in political and economic democratisation<sup>5</sup>.

## New vocabularies in Amsterdam’s municipality

Amsterdam’s Fearless City Programme was set up in 2019, following the election of a left-leaning coalition of parties to the municipal government in 2018<sup>6</sup>. Rutger Groot Wassink, a politician from the Green Party, became deputy mayor, and alderman for social affairs, democratization and diversity, and declared his enthusiasm for the project of municipalism. In a 2019 article, he argues jointly with Femke Roosma, the political leader of the Green Party in Amsterdam, that municipalism has great “potential”:

In short, politics can be reinvented in cities. Never mind the institutions, back to the neighbourhoods, the squares, the agora. Only then can new urban movements become catalysts for political change, which eventually will spread to national and European levels.<sup>7</sup>

By establishing a team to work on this vision, with a name explicitly referencing the municipalist Fearless Cities network, Groot Wassink sought to align his agenda in Amsterdam with the global municipalist movement.



Photo: De 99VanAmsterdam <sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A brief list of recommendations drawn from the suggestions of activists and policymakers we spoke to is found at the end of this report.

<sup>6</sup> Made up of GroenLinks, D66, the Labour Party, and the Socialist Party.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://wetenschappelijkbureaugroenlinks.nl/artikel-tijdschrift/municipalism>

<sup>8</sup> Translation: ‘Expensive or sustainable; all-inclusive or including everyone; solitary or solidarity; profit for the 1% or welfare for the 99%’. Image source: Facebook page of De 99 Van Amsterdam

Municipalism is one of several terms which have recently begun to punctuate policy documents in Amsterdam. Since 2018, the municipality has adopted concepts such as “the donut economy” and “community wealth building” from left-leaning thinkers and movements currently seeking ways to pursue political, social and economic change at the local scale. Among these terms, occasionally, we find “the commons”. The municipality’s local democratization programme, for example, sees commons, defined as “democratic organisations in which the participants together take care of a collective good”, as one of its eight priorities<sup>9</sup>. For Groot Wassink and Roosma, protecting and enlarging the commons is a core ambition of municipalism,

On a municipal level the ideal of the commons may be designed tangibly, forcing back the dominance of the global economic powers: by supporting or setting up joint neighbourhood economies and co-operatives in health care, sustainable energy and other services.<sup>10</sup>

These words gesture towards the theoretical synergy between municipalism and the commons, a conceptual alliance which we take as the starting point for this short report. If, at its core, municipalism aims to reclaim and defend local places from neoliberal capitalism, then these local places are made up of shared resources and social relations which can be understood as commons, constantly under threat of enclosure by capital. In a city, commons can include shared housing, water, energy, food, but also collective sociality, education and political imaginaries; all areas which municipalists across the globe are working to protect and develop.

## Theoretical allies: municipalism and the commons

The concept of the commons has long enticed activists and theorists. In cities, as in areas from digital technology to healthcare, the commons have been defined as a critical response to capitalism. Since “[c]apitalist development requires the destruction of communal properties and relations”, the commons propose “new forms of sociality and provisioning under communal control and organized on the principle of social cooperation” (Federici 2018: 89). The commons, today as throughout history, nurture forms of collective life that redefine value by use rather than exchange, presenting a structural force constructing and defending alternatives to capitalism: “[w]hile for Marx the commodity is the elementary form of capitalist wealth, so for me common goods are the elementary form of wealth of a postcapitalist world” (De Angelis 2017: 23).

If the commons operates as an ideal horizon of alternative post-capitalist politics to motivate

---

9 See: <https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/volg-beleid/democratisering/#h47eb-b08f-3c46-4cbd-9da1-82e34fe5dbc7>

10 *ibid*



activists and theorists alike, it also provides practical tools for the daily tasks of political organising. Joost, a community organiser in Amsterdam, defines practices of “commoning” simply, as when “common ground [is used] and run by a community”. His emphasis on the verb “commoning” avoids the tricky question of identifying exactly which “ground” or resource counts as “a common”, echoing David Harvey’s definition of commoning as a “social practice”:

At the heart of the practice of commoning lies the principle that the relation between the social group and that aspect of the environment being treated as a common shall be both collective and non-commodified - off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations. (2012:73)

The daily reality of resisting the forces of market and state in order to facilitate horizontal collective relations, however, is fraught with difficulties; spaces of what Joost terms “common ground” are often fragile in capital-driven cities like Amsterdam. This is in part because of what Harvey (among others) has identified as the central limitation of commoning: “[t]here is, dearly, an analytically difficult “scale problem” at work here that needs (but does not receive) careful evaluation” (2012:69). How can commoning, a strategy so rooted in the local context of everyday life and social relations, and historically so attached to potentially self-limiting horizontal methods of organising, attempt to address urgent global crises driven by neoliberal capitalism?

Climate change; migration; economic inequality; the rise of the far right. Many challenges we face today operate on what we might call a planetary scale, enveloping both the micro and macro experience of life in the 21st century. In response, even anarchist theorists invested in the need for commoning to produce autonomous relations and spaces beyond the logic of state and market, recognise that commons activists need to face up to the “scale problem”. David Graeber, who argues that commoning was briefly enacted by the global protests of the Occupy movement, recognises that

Temporary bubbles of autonomy must gradually turn into permanent, free communities. However, in order to do so, those communities cannot exist in total isolation; neither can they have a purely confrontational relation with everyone around them. They have to have some way to engage with larger economic, social or political systems that surround them [...] without having to make endless compromises in their founding principles. (2008:210)

How can we produce commons which are not “temporary bubbles of autonomy”, but active agents in larger systems, uncompromised vehicles for systemic change?

One answer, which this report will explore in the context of Amsterdam, is the contemporary movement of new municipalism. Can a municipalist local council, aiming to forge new horizontal collaborations with civil society, become an ally to local people and social movements

practicing commoning on the ground? As noted above, municipalism aims to empower people to claim and defend urban resources against capitalist enclosure. It also operates through the proximity of local people, activists and policymakers, by redefining local politics itself as a commons, as a shared resource, collectively and democratically produced and managed by local inhabitants and institutions. In theory, municipalism, a movement seeking to be embedded in neighbourhoods as well as trans-local networks of cities, might offer a way to scale up – or “scale out”, in Roth and Russell’s helpful revision<sup>11</sup> - the commons. The “scale problem” of the commons resonates in the context of Amsterdam, where commons have been historically marginalised, especially over the past four decades of privatisation driven by neoliberal urbanism.



Photo: Mahatma Gandhi Plantsoen

## Commoning in Amsterdam: Facing up to the “scale problem”

Safet, an activist inspired by the principles of commoning, has lived and worked on an Amsterdam housing cooperative for eleven people over the past decade. However, like many Amsterdam activists we spoke to, Safet is convinced that he needs to increase the reach of his work: “I’m up for doing more [commoning], but I am not super motivated to repeat the same scale, the same techniques, the same ambitions. I am only interested if you can get bigger and more effective.”

---

<sup>11</sup> See : <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2018-10-09/internationalism-and-the-new-municipalism/>

Reflecting on the history of commoning in Amsterdam, Safet pointed towards the failure of the Amsterdam squatting movement to adequately address the “scale problem” of commoning. For Safet, “non-legalized squats were too vulnerable and progressively more [...] isolated”. These squats may have created “temporary bubbles of autonomy”, in Graeber’s terms, but by the twenty-first century, the remnants of the squatting movement “seemed a bit disconnected from contemporary politics. And, like, post [the] 2008 crisis situation, they weren’t really able to confront those [crises], especially, say, in housing.” Without the support of wider social movements, networks and neighbourhoods in the city,

in 2010, [when] the squatter ban came into effect[...] the resistance was just a defence of people trying to preserve what they had. And there was no broader social sympathy that I could observe that was defending them or supporting them.

The lesson Safet takes from this history is that commons activism today needs to be much more open, embedded in the neighbourhoods that surround them and focused on expanding across Amsterdam to build coalitions. Commoning must be a tool to politicise civil society as a whole, not a practice of creating insular, inward-looking commons that are only accessible for small groups.

Safet’s emphasis on the need to expand the commons echoes Joost’s ambition to build “an archipelago [of commons], so it’s all like little islands in the ocean,” initiatives which overlap and feed off each other, as citizens become engaged in increasing numbers of common projects. Joost recounts how a neighbourhood Energy Cooperation established by his community centre became embedded in other local initiatives:

That’s commoning: it expands [...] the members of the Energy Cooperation, are [now] mentors of the children from the elementary school, and some are starting Dutch conversation lessons for refugees. But it started by being a member of the Energy Cooperation.

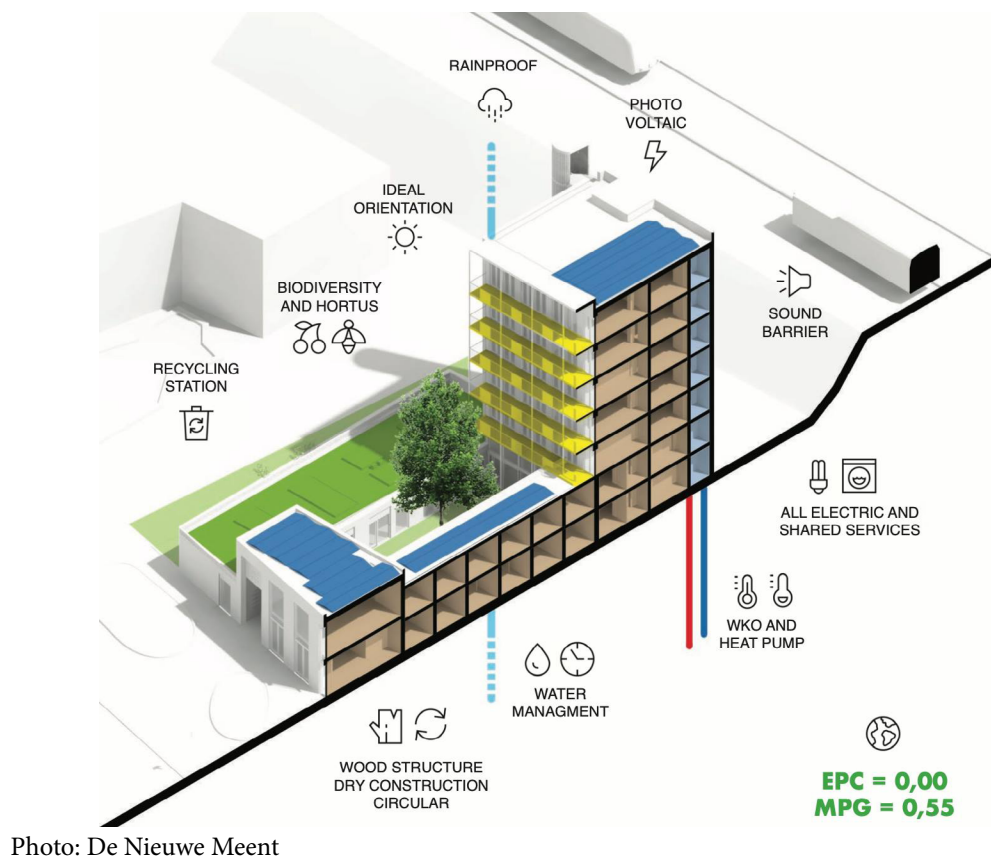
Joost expands his “archipelago” of commons through painstaking processes of building trust, cooperation and “common ground” between, in this case, residents who formed an Energy Cooperation, employees of various schools, and organisers of a cultural initiative with refugees.

Joost’s confident equation between commoning and expansion belies the challenge of growing the commons in practice, as Safet confirms: “there is no automatic growth [...] I experience it day to day and I know it’s tears and sweat and blood that’s involved.”

Commoning, as a political ideal, promises to produce collective life independent from both state



and market forces, but for activists like Joost and Safet this ideal loses relevance in the daily practice of urban politics. Joost's work bringing together neighbourhood initiatives in a community centre, which he identifies as "commoning", is facilitated by grants from the municipality and rental income from property owned by the community centre. Similarly, Safet's housing cooperative - "fully organised around the principals of commoning"<sup>12</sup> – was initiated by "applying to a tender and closely collaborating with the municipality." In his struggle to produce and extend collective resources and relations, Joost is happy to embrace the messiness of commoning, and to compromise its ideal principals: "commoning: it's not a question of developing something in a format or a box. Commoning is with your bare feet in the mud, looking for common ground." Joost description of commoning recalls Fran Tonkiss' argument that "critical urban practice" in cities dominated by capital must "find [...] space at the margins", setting aside the spirit of utopianism to work pragmatically "within current conditions and tight corners" to "create material spaces of hope in the city" (2016: 15, 12, 15).



## Municipalism in Amsterdam: Fragile alliances

Yet, activists like Joost and Safet are ambitious to move commoning practices beyond "the margins" in Amsterdam; they are both cautiously optimistic that the arrival of new municipalist vocabulary in the local government might help. However, like the other activists and policy-

<sup>12</sup> See: <https://nieuwemeent.nl/>

makers we spoke to, they recognise the significant challenges facing municipalist alliances in order to empower and extend the commons in Amsterdam. Amsterdam's municipalist project is still enmeshed in the failures of municipal politics to operate as a common for the people of Amsterdam; the hard work of inclusive municipalist alliance-building across scales of time and space seeks to change this, but it has a long way to go.

### “In practice, it's damned difficult”: Building trust across scales

Frictions between social movements and institutional municipal politics are conditioned by long histories of distance, distrust, and sometimes animosity, in Amsterdam as in many cities. These frictions can be framed as an inevitable obstacle to new municipalist alliances, but they also potentially underpin productive tensions in the relationship between the commons and the municipal state.

Practicing commoning and municipalism demands, as Joost knows well, “looking for how to become one another's ally. It's quite simple in words, but in practice, it's damned difficult.” A local councillor who observed Joost's arrival a decade ago in the neighbourhood where he now works, observed during a conversation with Joost and me, that,

at first everybody was like, you know... [laughs] they didn't want to have anything to do with Joost. The regulars in the neighbourhood, they were all sceptic[al]. And so slowly, you know... it's a lot of hard work. It's... taking a form.

Joost is convinced that to build trust, you need to find “common ground [...] so you have to know the name, the family name, the history and life story, the ambitions, the traumas, everything... and that takes time.” The same principle applies when expanding the commons within a neighbourhood and between municipalist cities – Safet agrees that, “I cannot just trust the words of someone I meet in a conference, whether they are just an opportunistic upcoming politician or they are embedded in their social movements.”

Many social movements and citizens have experienced fraught interactions with municipal politics, experiences that are not easily forgotten. Joost gives a lengthy warning about the dangers of co-optation through “the sophisticated bourgeois policy of the Dutch [...] called repressive tolerance: [...] so [the municipality] buy[s] a squat, and then the rules are of the system.” Safet describes how the instrumentalization of squats and art spaces for gentrification in Amsterdam has left “rooted mistrust and disconnection” between “whatever is left of radical social movements in this city” and the internationally-orientated “creatives and professionals” who hold panel discussions about urban politics in slick Amsterdam event spaces.

They cannot meet. They talk different languages. They have different codes. They have great distrust towards each other [...] Squatters look at these events [...] as, oh, this is pure co-optation, this is all empty words.

Participatory processes that have been initiated by the municipality have also often been judged as full of “empty words” by citizens. Toby, a commons activist focusing on climate justice, tells the story, for example, of a coalition of neighbourhood initiatives whose proposal for a park being re-developed in the South-East of the city was recently rejected. The local initiatives had applied for funding to establish community gardens in the park, where Surinamese vegetables could grow. The municipality, however, inspired by this idea, decided to award funds to a research institute which conducted a scientific investigation into whether Surinamese vegetables could grow in the park; the fact that locals had been growing Surinamese vegetables in the area for decades was not registered. Toby describes the inhabitants as “really wounded and upset” as their knowledges and perspectives were side-lined. In Toby’s eyes, deep-rooted political cultures in the municipality make it hard for policymakers to embrace bottom-up participatory processes of commoning; explaining the municipality’s decision in this instance, he considers,

they were too fearful to work with lots of different groups. They prefer to work with one group [and...] more with institutions as well. They feel like conflict can arise. And there’s this fear of working with difference and also taking time to share decision making.



Photo: Bloie & Groie

For Joost, legacies of distrust need to be overcome by reform of political practices in the municipality: “on the level of the system, we have [...] to make a shift [...] And it starts by respecting



the people who live in the neighbourhoods or in the city. Trust them. And don't treat them as if you don't trust them." In practice, this is, again, "damned difficult", to use Joost's phrase; a local councillor who has worked with Joost for a decade observes how,

to work [...] from a local perspective in a neighbourhood, you have to re-learn all these bureaucrats that have been doing this top-down, you know, from a policy theme - like, "OK, now we're going to work on sustainability." And then top-down they're going to roll it out, instead of looking locally like, "Hey, who's interested in this [...] who wants to be involved, who has a good idea?" [...] It's a whole different way of working and it's a lot more fun, but it's impossible for me even to get my colleagues to come out [to the community centre] from their positions and to... It's very difficult.

Hierarchical and competitive working cultures of municipal politics clash with practices of commoning which tend to aim for horizontal, collaborative organising. Municipalist political cultures and processes need to challenge the logic of neoliberalism, according to Joost, allowing people to "make the shift from being a competitor to an ally." Toby wonders how policymakers "really used to receiving orders from above [...] can] get into vulnerable situations where they don't know what's going to happen and share decision making?"

Distrust and discomfort are inherent to relationships between policymakers, citizens, activists and urban professionals. As political concepts and practices move across scales, between neighbourhoods and city halls and through international forums for debate, there are inevitably frustrations and tensions. Activists entering the municipality of Amsterdam report struggling with "personal motivation" as they encounter the complex space between political worlds that is the terrain of municipalism. Toby describes how difficult the role of activist-policymaker is: "you're in that kind of very complex situation where you feel like you're two people at once, or having to compromise. Sometimes you feel you're part of a social movement, sometimes you feel like you're upholding the hierarchy of the state." This kind of work can take a personal toll on people whose mediating roles embody the contradictions of municipalism. However, the fact that the tensions between different political actors in Amsterdam are being explored and that vulnerabilities are being exposed, is promising. Activist-policymakers, armed with new municipalist vocabulary, can begin conversations about shifting political cultures, alongside demanding concrete policy changes. For example, recognising the need to foster alliances rather than competition might lead to the re-design of discussion forums and tender processes.

Political opportunities are being constructed in the awkward space created by activists and policymakers combining commoning and municipal politics. Safet is fully aware that municipalism, like any political project, is an exercise in compromise, and "imperfect as it is, these are the tools we have in the toolbox". His own housing cooperative embraces the contradictions of cooperation with institutional politics: it bears a logo of

the squatter sign, but without the arrow: it's like a castrated squatter sign, which is a tongue in cheek reference to, "Haha yeah we come from this heritage, but we are definitely much more tamed and domesticated." [...] All our hands were tied [by the housing cooperation regulations]. So we approached it already with the sense that: "OK, like we don't even know if this would work out politically, if we will have to lose our souls at some point or drop out. But it's worth the try already."

This willingness to embrace the frictions underpinning the combination of commoning and municipal politics marks a potentially promising departure from the historical tendency of Amsterdam's social movements to resist alliances with the state. Crucially, Safet closely monitors the fine line between alliance and co-optation: he is prepared to "drop out" if the compromises demand too much. Joost is confident that he wields power as both a friend and an enemy of the municipality "depending on the issue. So I have a good relationship, but when there's really the case, I can be an activist, too", for example, by supporting initiatives disregarded by the municipality, or by "formulat[ing] an ultimatum" when a "bottom line" has been reached by the policy-makers he negotiates with. Ultimately, eliminating the tensions between political actors in Amsterdam is both unrealistic and undesirable, since, as scholars of agonistic democracy have long argued, conflict can be a productive force. Building trust through municipalist alliances is both necessary, and necessarily unfinished. Municipalism, like commoning, unfolds as a messy, contradictory process, a process which is still in its earliest stages of expanding across Amsterdam.

### 'Well, thanks for all the attention, but I'm not going to speak everywhere': inclusive participation across scales

The traditional modes of operation of municipal politics in Amsterdam, as in most parts of the world, are inherently exclusionary. Activists like Joost, Toby and Safet represent a highly educated and privileged demographic able to experiment with building alliances with the municipality. How far does their ability to negotiate the fraught terrain of Amsterdam's nascent municipalism extend to activists from marginalised backgrounds and identities?

When Joost discusses how he manages collaborations with the municipality he describes how "you have to know on which button you have to push. So, when you push the right button, it's right. But when you push the wrong button then it's sabotaging the initiative." When asked how he knows which button to push, Joost puts it down to "fingerspitzengefühl" – that "fingertips feeling" of instinct, situational awareness and tact – a kind of feeling which is developed through deep knowledge of an environment. This kind of technique for "dealing with the system", in Joost's terms, is much more easily accessed by an educated middle-aged white man like Joost, than by the many people in Amsterdam from class, race, educational and gender backgrounds that make them overwhelmingly unaccustomed to spaces and processes of municipal power.

Similarly, Toby, who has interned at the municipality, often works by finding ‘little hacks [to] make legal changes’, and the success of Safet’s housing cooperative application was facilitated by the fact that he was working with a team of academics – including ‘one mathematician in the core team’ who developed a ‘genius approach’ to corrupting the rule of the market, and Safet himself whose ‘thesis and everything is in cultural analysis. So, like, juggling with words, creating discourses around it, was like, OK, something I was confident in.’ Political processes and cultures, from informal networking phone calls to tender procedures, need to evolve in light of this<sup>13</sup>.

If Amsterdam municipality is to work, through municipalism, to protect, develop and extend the commons, it must begin with questions of access and representation. Many commoning initiatives, networks and spaces currently on the radar of the municipality struggle with these questions – Safet observes, for example, that his housing cooperative may be ‘a great activist infrastructure for the whole city, or let’s say for the radicals in the city, but we are not very well connected to the neighbours’. Toby describes an activist forum he has taken part in as ‘not very representative [of Amsterdam’s population]. More representative of power. So mainly, uh, yeah... white men.’ Even seemingly more straightforwardly formal processes of participation like neighbourhood participatory budgeting provokes ‘a lot of critics: [...] you don’t reach everybody because a lot of people don’t vote’, Eva, who works for a resident support association, reminds us. Often, the same commons or community initiatives are referenced by activists, academics or policymakers we have spoken to – this is in part because of the low levels of politicisation in Amsterdam as a whole, and in part because the municipality has work to do to open up to the city. As Toby concludes, ‘they struggle, they really struggle to reach lots of people. So even when they open up a democratic process, it’s usually a really small group of people who access that opportunity.’

There are rare examples of commons initiatives embedded in Amsterdam neighbourhoods and representative of local diversity, often ones that have been established for a long time, and do not necessarily use the terminology of the commons or municipalism. However, since the emergence of the municipalist agenda in Amsterdam, they have been inundated with requests from activists, policymakers and researchers seeking to celebrate them. For example, Toby tells me about a feminist community garden initiative led by migrant women in the South-East of Amsterdam, who have been ‘overwhelmed’ by the attention they are currently receiving:

it’s like everyone wants to collaborate with them and [they are] hyper-visible. And it’s a lot of pressure [...] I think there’s a real wish to be inclusive, so then when a group does arise it’s like, ‘Wow. Yes!’ and [they] get invited to everything.

---

13 See recommendations at the end of this report for some suggestions of how to put this into practice.



Eva tells a similar story of an organiser of a neighbourhood platform which has been identified as “successful” by civil society leaders in Amsterdam. This community organiser was “fed up” with the pressure to engage in events and networks working to expand the commons: “Eventually he said, ‘well, thanks for all the attention, but I’m not going to speak everywhere [...] I want to spend all my time and energy in the neighborhoods. And also I’m a volunteer.”

In the face of these understandable tensions, how can the municipality build alliances to extend the commons inclusively in Amsterdam? Practical steps can be taken, like addressing the structurally exclusive demand for volunteer labour. Alongside this, forums of debate and exchange, which have the potential to underpin the project of scaling up the commons through municipalism, must be made meaningful in concrete ways to participants. If such discussion events are co-designed with participants, the risk of them losing relevance to the political practices of participants, or worse, feeling exploitative, might be minimised. Toby describes how collaborative neighbourhood meetings he has attended have left participants feeling “used” by the municipality: they “even feel like their ideas are being just like absorbed” whilst the policymakers “really kept quiet [...] just listening, listening, listening, and then later on doing their own selection of what they liked from the citizens.”

Sites of municipalism – from discussion forums to participatory processes – need to make space for marginalised citizens without burdening them with hyper-visibility, and without amplifying their voices whilst withholding the actual power to make political decisions. If Amsterdam municipality seeks to pursue municipalism, it must develop new practices of municipal politics that empower the genuinely inclusive expansion of the commons. These practices should be guided by an ideal horizon of urban politics as an inclusive, open-access commons.

### “Blueprints of the future?": Expanding in time as well as in space

Amsterdam’s Fearless City Programme is working to build alliances across scales of space – both between neighbourhood initiatives, the municipality and city-wide social movements, and, beyond Amsterdam, along translocal networks of cities affiliated with the new municipalist movement. In theory, this model of municipalism across scales represents a powerful vehicle for the spatial expansion of the commons simultaneously across the city and beyond it. In practice, as ever, this work becomes messier, and the need to balance priorities between the local and the translocal puts pressure on alliances at all levels.

Some commons activists in Amsterdam are adamant about the value of translocal alliances between municipalist cities. Safet observes that urban politics are shaped by “so many different

[...] levels at the same time”: power is often “not at the immediate civil servants level, it’s not even at the municipal level. There’s national level. There’s the European level. There is the financial, the global level. So all of these are entangled for sure.” The Fearless City Programme acknowledges this entanglement of political scales in its decision to launch a two-month online international Forum for municipalist cities in Spring 2021. The Forum aims to open up space “for thinkers and doers from [various] cities to come together, share, inspire, learn from each other, connect and work together”<sup>14</sup>. However, the organisers of the Forum are keen to resist romanticisation of international exchanges between grassroots commoning initiatives operating in very different urban contexts. They are working to design an event that empowers activists meaningfully in practice, but are aware of activists on the ground who question the relevance of translocal alliance building to the daily grind of expanding the commons in neighbourhoods. Joost, for example, admits playfully that

crossing Europe to collect all kinds of experience is quite interesting. You have a lot of time, uh, a nice time. And you can spend your time in a squat in Bologna or at a cooperative in Barcelona, and walk on the beach in Barcelona. Yeah... but that’s not what it’s about. [It’s about] bare feet in the mud.



Photo: Ru Paré

Unfortunately, the municipalist experimentation currently set in motion by Amsterdam municipality does not have “a lot of time”. The programme is only officially running between September 2020 and May 2021, and after the next municipal elections, in 2022, the future of the Fearless Cities work is uncertain. Marly recognises this, responding dismissively to my question about the legacy of The Fearless City Programme after it ends, and especially after the election: “Depends on politics. It’s out of our hands.” Marly accepts that the work of alliance building through

14 See: <https://citiesforchange.org/>

municipalism “Takes also a lot of time. And we don’t all have that time so I’m also like, yeah, “Just do it, start doing it, and we’ll see later on...” This sense of urgency is reflected in the rhythm of much political organising unfolding with limited time and resources in Amsterdam. Toby describes networks and discussion spaces being set up in “quite a rushed process [...] It’s like, “let’s make it, have a meeting, let’s make decisions quick, let’s make a programme quick. Okay. Let’s have a launch date.” This puts pressure on the slow, laborious process of building trust and inclusive alliances – even in the very practical sense of organisers leaning on their existing networks rather than seeking out participants not yet politically engaged in the city.

Moreover, the limited time and resources invested by the municipality fuels the distrust of social movements – eliciting critiques from activists that Amsterdam’s municipalist programme is “a lot of words and not a lot of change to the situation”. Eva is frustrated by the municipality’s approach to policies like participatory budgeting,

it’s always the short-term goals, in the short-term periods [...] And then you create these new ideas [through participatory budgeting]. But [...] you also have the organized groups that are already there. You need to support them because... these are there for the long, long term... If you want to reach the long-term goals in the neighbourhood, you have to cooperate with the groups that are already formed.

Rather than being too distracted by experimental initiatives, Eva would encourage the municipality to work with partners who have invested years, or decades, in building neighbourhood alliances – like Joost, whose initial decision to work on the community centre was founded on a desire to be “a firm base. I’m not going to come, and then after a month, I’m gone.” Safet, who, in contrast, is generally enthused by experimentalism and its relation to long-term policy shifts, was also sharply aware of the limiting pressures of time:

The transfer of our learnings to shape [...] policy and to influence future projects is super important. But, like, we can barely have the time and the capacity to run our own project. How are we going to create the blueprints of the future?

A long-term investment of time and resources would empower Amsterdam municipality’s current exploration of municipalism. Able to work slowly and strategically, different political groups could take the necessary time to strengthen alliances inclusively, extending the commons across scales of space and time. Joost’ emphasis on time-scales is instructive here: he argues that,

We have to get back to our roots as a city [...] the commoning movement is not something new. It’s part of local history. When you can’t connect with the local history [...] it’s only for the happy few [...] Not for the ordinary people.

## Conclusion: municipalism and the commons allies in Amsterdam?

In Amsterdam, the terms “municipalism” and “commoning” have helped to lay ground for new political alliances, even if this ground, for now, is carved out precariously “at the margins” of Amsterdam politics (Tonkiss 2016: 15). Despite the challenges of mistrust, exclusivity and short-termism which hamper the municipalist agenda in Amsterdam, the exploration of these new vocabularies signals the fragile beginnings of a project to expand the commons through municipalist alliances and to reinvigorate Amsterdam’s once vibrant political life.

It is certainly “damned difficult” to carve out ground for municipalism in Amsterdam, even at the level of language. Marly sometimes struggles to translate the terms “municipalism” and “the commons” into Amsterdam’s context: introducing municipalism to Amsterdam is a “really difficult assignment [...] it’s a vague assignment [...] because there’s a vision behind it which is implicit”. More explicitly radical municipalist visions found in places like Barcelona translate uneasily to Amsterdam:

you have international activists, especially from Spain, who are more used to working with these kind of [terms], but here [in Amsterdam] the vocabulary’s just different. [Amsterdam municipality] have a different narrative that’s more bureaucratic, less politicized, and so translating this without changing the meaning too much is really a burden.

However, it is also in this process of translation that the political potential of these concepts as alliance building tools might emerge. As terms like “municipalism” and “commoning” move between contexts in the delicate process of alliance building, their vagueness can prove productive. “The commons”, for Safet and his team, for example, was a term able to appeal at once to activists and to the municipality. Careful manipulation of language enabled the project to strike this balance:

we did start this project [...] with, you know, announcing, “yeah, we are building a post-capitalist commune”. I’m sure [the municipality] saw it as well. But that didn’t end up being in our application: the application was built around the commons and commoning and care and diversity and sustainability. So these are languages that the municipality understands and can relate to [...] by the sheer principle of organising [the project] around commons, I believe we had a bigger chance [...] to create [...] the impression, also on their sides, that, “oh, yes, we are aligned.”

The indeterminate meanings of a concept like “commons” facilitates a translation between the language of activism and the language of policy. Amsterdam municipality, as noted in the opening pages of this report, defines commons broadly as “democratic organisations in which the participants together take care of a collective good”. Such an open definition neither affirms nor



denies the more radical post-capitalist meanings carried by the concept of the commons for many activists and theorists; instead it allows space for different definitions to coexist alongside one another, appealing at once to social movements and to more conservative institutional politics. Commons, in this process, functions almost as an “empty signifier”, a word, in Laclau’s (2005) definition, like “change” or “democracy”, which is understood in such shifting ways that it is able to bring together diverse political actors and perspectives around a shared agenda.

But how deep are municipalist alliances founded on vague shared vocabularies and “impressions” of alignment? For terms like “commoning” and “municipalism” to make an impact in Amsterdam, they need to also be engaged with as tools for politicisation rooted in concrete practices. This is reflected in the opinions of many Amsterdam neighbourhood groups who, in Eva’s experience, have “a lot of interest [in the terms “commoning” and “municipalism”], and also groups that say, “well, we’d like to learn more about it, but also how can we apply it? [...] it always has to be action.” Discussion forums engaging the vocabulary of municipalism in Amsterdam today are cognisant of this. For example, Joost’s community centre holds a regular “Commons Lab” where case studies of Amsterdam initiatives are discussed; a recent discussion themed around “alliances” brought together activists from a community centre in the north, a women’s support group in the west, and a neighbourhood advocacy organisation in the south-east, where a large urban development is being built. In these spaces, and through these practices, people in Amsterdam can go beyond the productive vagueness of “municipalism” and “commoning” to begin seeking collective definitions and developing political practices rooted in the context of this city.

Yet more concretely, the Fearless Cities Programme is experimenting with several pilot projects seeking to put the theoretical alignment of “commons” and “municipalism” into practice. Community wealth building methodologies, for example, have been employed to help local movements in disenfranchised neighbourhoods develop their neighbourhoods as a commons, where wealth generated locally is re-distributed locally. It is through direct experience of these experimental initiatives that terms like “municipalism” and “the commons” can gain meaning for people who have been cut off from politics by the past decades of neoliberal depoliticisation in Amsterdam. These pilot initiatives may only be accorded a fragile slice of time and space in Amsterdam’s political story, hampering their ability to expand inclusively across the city and re-imagine its future. However, the municipalist spirit that animates the Fearless Cities Programme is echoed in the readiness of activists we spoke to from across the city to find new alliances with the municipality. Municipalist alliances in Amsterdam unfold, like commoning, without a “formula”; instead, activists and policymakers inch towards one another, building and testing trust tentatively, working, as Joost insists, with their “bare feet in the mud”.

## Recommendations: expanding the commons through municipalism in Amsterdam

The following recommendations are inspired by the findings of this report, and the suggestions of the Amsterdam activists and policymakers we spoke to:

- > Building trust through municipalist alliances:
  - > Amsterdam municipality should signal their commitment to municipalism and readiness to trust citizens by increasing the funds, spaces and expertise made available to support neighbourhood commoning initiatives.
  - > Early experiments in exchanging working practices (such as organising staff exchanges between grassroots organisations and the municipality or developing resources for democratic discussion facilitation) should be expanded.
- > Expanding inclusively:
  - > Participation in neighbourhood initiatives and democratic experiments should be paid to minimise the structural exclusivity of volunteer labour.
  - > Regular commons assemblies should be employed to engage political actors from across Amsterdam – citizens, activists, policymakers and academics – in open, democratic discussion. These assemblies could be designed to facilitate concrete alliance building between diverse parties, rather than to showcase examples of best practice to limited audiences.
  - > The allocation of funds, spaces and resources needs to be politicised so that the neighbourhoods and initiatives most in need receive support from the municipality, rather than those who are structurally privileged and more likely to succeed in open calls and competitive tenders. The re-design of selection processes and criteria could be developed in the forum of commons assemblies.
- > Expanding in time as well as in space:
  - > Both new and existing initiatives in Amsterdam need to be supported for longer periods of time (years rather than months) to allow them to develop their full potential independently of municipal electoral cycles.
  - > Commons assemblies in Amsterdam can be designed to facilitate intergenerational activist exchange, allowing current initiatives to learn from Amsterdam's history.
  - > International municipalist exchange should be rooted in the sharing and adapting of concrete methodologies and tools for allying practices of commoning and municipalism in different contexts.

## Bibliography

- > De Angelis, M. 2017. *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*. London: Zed Books
- > Federici, S. 2018. *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Oakland, CA: Kairos, PM Press
- > David Graeber. 2008., *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, Oakland, California: AK Press
- > Harvey, D. 2012. *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. New York: Verso
- > Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- > Thompson, Matthew. 2020. What's so new about New Municipalism? *Progress in Human Geography*, 45.2 (2021): 317–342.
- > Tonkiss, Fran. 2013. Austerity urbanism and the makeshift city, *City*, 17:3, 312-324
- > Tim Verlaan, 'Build Something Different for a Change: How the People of Amsterdam Resisted the Sell-Out of their City Centre', in: V. Mamadouh and A. van Wageningen (eds.), *Urban Europe: Fifty Tales of the City* (Amsterdam 2016) 139-146.
- > Uitermark, J., & Nicholls, W. 2014. From politicization to policing: the rise and decline of new social movements in Amsterdam and Paris. *Antipode*, 46(4), 970-991.