

MINIM REPORT N.VII | NOV 2021 |

The lay of the land:



Radical municipalism in the US and Canada

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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.

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The lay of the land:

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A protest for tenant's rights in Los Angeles. Photo: Los Angeles Tenant's Union

Introduction

During the last five years, we have seen major social and political upheavals across the United States and Canada. Yet beneath the surface of tumultuous events, such as the George Floyd uprisings, Donald Trump's presidency, or the COVID19 pandemic, a new tendency of grassroots organizing is taking root. This tendency, which we call radical municipalism, galvanizes activists seeking to meet people's basic needs through a focus on local autonomy and confederation. Linking daily struggles with the development of a powerful new political awareness, subjectivity, and praxis, radical municipalism deploys real democracy to build a future that is both socially just and ecological.

The following report sketches out the constellation of radical municipalist projects in the US and Canada. A key goal for this report is to bring the lessons from North American struggles into conversation with municipalist movements around the world, especially those in Europe and Latin America, where municipalist movements are currently relatively more active and dynamic.

In doing so, we wish to point out the unique conditions and challenges presented by the nature of the United States and Canada as two powerful Global North countries directly founded on African chattel slavery, Indigenous genocide, and staggering corporate power. Both countries remain central to military and financial empire and are some of the world's most popular destinations for migrants and refugees. These unique historical and sociological conditions offer important lessons for municipalist movements worldwide.

In this report, we focus primarily on radical municipalist projects, which foreground extra-electoral assemblies, bottom-up confederations, and educational work for deep social transformation. The term 'municipalism' has multiple valences and synonyms in the English-speaking world that make the movement difficult to sum up. Municipalism, democratic confederalism, libertarian municipalism, communalism — these are, as Barcelona-based municipalist Kate Shea-Baird puts it [in a 2018 blog post](#), “multiple words describing more or less the same thing”. While all movements are internally fragmented and contradictory, this fragmentation is intensified in the US and Canada as diverse social and intellectual movement trajectories collide and overlap. Confounding things even further, many progressive movements and projects adopt municipalist tactics, strategies, and goals, but not the name.

This delineation of course comes at the expense of discussing local progressive candidates and parties, citywide programs, and NGO work — activities which are relatively more visible and well-resourced yet are also more deeply embedded in the settler-colonial capitalist system. Radical municipalists are not content to form assemblies on the sidelines, nor do they find it sufficient to run progressive activists for office. Rather, they seek to organize communities to seize political local institutions and galvanize a 'dual power' against the state.

We believe the focus on a multivalent radical municipalism is important, especially in the US and Canada. The history of Indigenous genocide and dispossession, slavery, imperialism, and successive waves of migration has created a distinctively fragmented cultural and economic landscape. The reality of ongoing settler colonialism is not a distant concern, as it often feels like in Western Europe, but is lived every day. In addition, daily life for the majority of people in these two countries is shaped by the automobile, suburbia, policing, and, more generally, a landscape of alienation and imposed scarcity—more pervasively than perhaps any other context in the world. In great part due to this differentiation of people's positions within political power structures, and the material reality of alienated lived experience, social movements have been forced to grapple with a wide array of structural, intersectional systems of power in their day-to-day organizing. Thus, we might say that the best way to characterize radical municipalism in the US and Canada is not by static criteria, but by the dynamic nature of the experiments it creates. Today, such experiments are modest and messy, seemingly discontinuous and separate from each other. But tomorrow they may be key to unlocking radical social change in North

America and can inform movements globally on issues as diverse as racial and migrant justice, decolonization, anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism.

In the following, we first detail a movement in six nodes: 1) the movement for economic democracy, 2) the social ecology movement, 3) the municipal socialist movement, 4) radical tenant unions, 5) mutual aid networks, and 6) Indigenous resurgence. We delineate dilemmas that are distinctive to these movements because of the particular political histories of the US and Canada, such as the relationship of social movements to electoral cycles, the problem of professionalisation (and consequently the de-radicalization) of leadership, and the urgent need of organizing strategies attuned to suburban and rural areas.

Finally, in the conclusion, we describe two key lessons for municipalism elsewhere. First, we argue that the North American experience shows that, small as a municipalist project may be, it can have an outside effect on local politics and the popular imagination in times of crisis. Laying the groundwork according to radical municipalist principles is therefore crucial. Second, we argue that the unique context in these countries has led to innovative experiments in municipalism, whereby municipalists are forced to confront issues of race, policing, mobility, settler colonialism, and migration on a daily basis.

The story of municipalism in the last few decades in the US and Canada is an uneasy one, with many ups and downs, which has constantly been threatened with subsumption by urgent, catastrophic events and rebellions. But the persistence and growing importance of radical municipalist principles and organizing is a testament to their power to challenge systems of hierarchy and domination, and their pertinence in this precarious moment in world history.

Key events

> Rojava Revolution // 2012-Present

The Rojava Revolution in Northern Syria, which enacts Murray Bookchin's radical municipalist politics as a political paradigm, has led to a surge of interest in radical municipalist politics in the United States.

> Idle No More // 2012-2013

A protest movement against the abuses of treaty rights of Indigenous and First Nations, initiated by the hunger strike of Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence. Actions involved round dances in public spaces and blockades of rail lines.

- > Cooperation Jackson established // 2014
The cooperative network Cooperation Jackson has been an important break from NGO politics and top-down Marxist organizing strategies that have dominated the South.
- > Standing Rock // 2015
Massive protests against the Dakota XL Pipeline galvanize Indigenous people from around the world at The Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North and South Dakota inhabited by bands of the Lakota and Dakota.
- > Bernie Sanders Presidential Campaign // 2016
The Presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders in 2016 galvanized a generation of Americans fed up with the “centrist” neoliberal positions of the Democratic Party. The campaign normalized use of the term “socialism” and drew tens of thousands of members into the Democratic Socialists of America, a nation-wide grassroots organization which often applies municipalist-style campaigns and programs.
- > Anti-Trump Resistance // 2017
Far-right Republican Donald Trump blitzes the country by targeting immigrants, while the impotent Democratic Party were powerless to stop him. Neighborhood alliances, such as the Neighborhood Action Councils of Seattle form around the country to protect immigrants and undocumented people.
- > Hurricane Maria // 2017
The deadly Category 5 hurricane Maria devastates the US-occupied island of Puerto Rico, which is subsequently abandoned by President Trump. In the place of state-run relief, neighborhood mutual aid becomes the basis of everyday survival for the island. The movement evolves into a program of community self-determination, further popularizing the idea of municipalist governance.
- > Fearless Cities North America // 2018
Municipalists in North America hold their first international conference in New York City at New York University. Hundreds of individuals and dozens of organizations participate from across the US, Canada, and Mexico.

- > Launch of “Jackson Rising” program // 2018
The Jackson Rising program establishes a program for a radically-democratic Southern US region, renewing the New Afrika movement through a lens of grassroots economic power, popular assemblies, and radical electoral politics at the local level.
- > Symbiosis Conference // 2019
The radical municipalist network Symbiosis holds its own international gathering in Detroit, Michigan to cultivate a North American confederation of organization with radical municipalist goals and programs.
- > Wet’suwet’en Land Defense // 2020
Indigenous activism in Canada rises sharply in 2020. Traditional and Indigenous forms of community self-determination are asserted as part of the struggle for decolonization. Land defense via non-hierarchical decision-making practices underscores the intimate relationship between ecological and social liberation.
- > Covid-19 Crisis // 2020-ongoing
An unprecedented global pandemic leads to the rapid proliferation of mutual aid networks around the world. In the US and Canada, Covid-19 was accompanied by massive labor and housing crises and corresponding rise in militancy.

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In the following section, we provide a detailed profile of the organizations within the movement, characterizing a network with six “nodes”.

Node 1 / Economic democracy



Members of Cooperation Tulsa help with building a community garden in Tulsa, Oklahoma at the Historical Vernon AME Church, a Black church just north of the site of the Tulsa Race Massacre. Source: Roberto Mendoza / Cooperation Tulsa.

Projects like Cooperation Jackson, the [People's Movement Assembly](#), and Project South are the living inheritance of a centuries-old Southern tradition of direct democracy and self-governance. Centuries ago, Black freeman communities, such as those in Geechee, Georgia, allied and overlapped with Indigenous peoples and participated in open rebellion against the fledgling United States.

Today, the movement for radical Southern autonomy foregrounds the key issue of material and economic injustice. Growing out of Black nationalist and Marxist traditions, as well as from radical Southern community organizing, the Civil Rights movement, and the Black-led farm cooperative movement. While the white-dominated cooperative movement of the 1970s and 1980s framed cooperatives as an interaction between individual consumers or workers, Cooperation Jackson emphasizes relationships between organizations, such as between farmers and city-dwellers, between the unemployed and those who can provide important goods and services...as well as community control over land and resources.

Community-controlled wealth is also emerging in the NGO world, with organizations such as the New Economy Coalition marshaling and channeling financial resources to be used by communities through participatory deliberation processes. This variety of approaches which share the key insight that real democracy is impossible without economic equality and wealth redistribution.

Examples of prominent organisations

> Cooperation Jackson

An alliance of cooperatives and worker-owned enterprises in Jackson, Mississippi, a mid-sized, predominantly Black Southern city. Their activities include running a local farm and a community technology center, hosting community assemblies, and conducting experiments with bartering and non-monetary forms of exchange in addition to campaign and educational work. Cooperation Jackson was launched in 2014 as a key initiative of the Jackson-Kush Plan, a renewed expression of the New Afrika concept. The Jackson-Kush Plan outlines a comprehensive vision for social and ecological liberation for the region led by a People's Assembly. The Jackson-Kush model has inspired a proliferation of similar "cooperation" networks and collectives around the country.

> Cooperation Richmond

In Richmond, California Cooperation Richmond leads a network of community owned and operated businesses. led by people who are historically from the Richmond community. One key project is a black owned worker cooperative bike shop that works closely with youth.

> Cooperation Worcester

A cooperative alliance in Worcester, Massachusetts.

> Cooperation Tulsa

A collective based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Cooperation Tulsa focuses on Indigenous values and teaching, while working on issues of housing, police brutality, and mutual aid. They are part of the Symbiosis network.

> Cooperation Milwaukee

A collective based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, that organizes an autonomous tenants' union and is working with the Industrial Workers of the World by providing space for cooperative shops. They are also a member of the Symbiosis network.

> Cooperation Denton

Cooperation Denton in the city of Denton, Texas organizes a Feminism and Inclusion Council.

> Carbondale Spring

An organization in Carbondale, Illinois, which focuses on defunding the police, food autonomy, community crisis intervention, renewable energy, and worker cooperatives.

> Cooperation New Orleans

An organization aiming to strengthen the cooperative infrastructure in New Orleans, develop language justice, advance local political education, and setting up a community loan fund.

Collective deliberation among communities at the grassroots level is meaningless without the participation of all people within those communities. Poverty and overwork present some of the steepest barriers to a popular municipalist movement in the US and Canada. This wealth inequality is of course deeply racialized. A study by the Brookings Institute in 2016 found that the median net worth of white families was ten times greater than a typical Black family. In Canada, First Nations people consistently make far less than other Canadians beneath particularly among people with education below the level of a bachelor's degree. However, radically horizontal social movements driven by middle-class white leftists have unwittingly recreated an environment of white supremacy that also alienates poor whites. These movements tend to define "democracy" by virtue of their decision-making processes. However, doing so overlooks the incredibly undemocratic nature of who is and (who is not) in the room in the first place. Inserting economic democracy, material self-sufficiency, and wealth redistribution must be a key goal for any democratic movement worthy of the name. Projects in the economic democracy movement attempt to do just that, correcting middle-class fascination with formal procedure.

How they advance municipalist goals

- > Moving away from traditional Marxist top-down modes of organizing, cultivating and embracing popular assemblies and horizontal, confederal networks as the authentic mode of community self-determination.
- > Promoting radical policy agendas among local political institutions.
- > Integrating social and economic justice work with radical ecology.
- > Placing popular assemblies into practice, linking popular assemblies with local, Indigenous, and African diaspora knowledge and traditions.

Challenges

- > Key organizers of Cooperation Jackson feel their highly-publicized 2017 alliance with then-candidate Chokwe Antar Lumumba led them into the “Syriza trap”. Tremendous movement energy was diverted into the election campaign of a public official who — once in power — shrugged off his radical affiliations, rejected his campaign promises rooted in the movement, and positioned himself as a “moderate” voice.
- > Popular assemblies require a tremendous amount of popular education to operate smoothly.
- > Material challenges like poverty, overwork, and lack of movement resources continue to inhibit popular participation and exhaust movement organizers. White supremacist political and structural violence makes open radical organizing dangerous for people of color and Black people in particular.

Further Reading

- > Jackson Rising
- > Electoral pursuits have veered us away Kali Akuno on movement lessons from Jackson, Mississippi.
- > In depth with Clark Arrington, a pioneer for cooperatives and black economic power (Part 1)
- > Moving Jackson forward: Opposing visions of a People’s Assembly
- > What is the southern movement assembly?
- > How Cooperation Richmond is empowering marginalized communities to build an equitable economy
- > First we take Jackson: the new American municipalism
- > ‘Freedom Farmers’ Tells the history of black farmers uniting against racism
- > On Black Women’s Ecologies – AAIH
- > Black autonomy and lessons from the Black Power struggle

Node 2 / The social ecology movement



The 2017 Summer Gathering of the Institute for Social Ecology. Source: Aaron Vansintjan

Social ecology is a radical movement that strives to bring about social and ecological liberation via confederal direct democracy. It is closely associated with the utopian ideas of US theorist and philosopher Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), who coined the term “libertarian municipalism” in the 1980s to describe his views on politics, direct democracy, and dual power. Libertarian municipalists are explicit in their goals to transform local governments into directly democratic assemblies and revitalize citizenship. For the last four decades, social ecologists have percolated throughout and taken leadership in social movements in the US and Canada, such as in helping build processes of direct democracy in the Occupy Movement and helping to develop the Green Party. Social ecologists are especially active in environmental justice movements like anti-pipeline activism and climate justice. Many social ecologists work as educators. Others have dedicated themselves to hands-on skills like ecological design, organic agriculture, and permaculture.

Social ecologists have been experimenting with radical municipalism since the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s and the Green Movement of the 1980s. Projects throughout New England to revitalize the region’s direct democracy continued well into the 1990s. In Burlington, Vermont, Bookchin and fellow social ecologists used the public platform of local politics and elections to advance a radical platform of direct democracy for the city, fighting gentrification and protecting public lands. Today, Bernie Sanders is celebrated as aiding anti-gentrification

efforts during his time as mayor of Burlington, including seeding the world's largest community land trust, the Burlington CLT. At the time, however, Mayor Sanders proposed the Alden Plan, which included selling Burlington's scenic waterfront to developers. In fact, it was through his office's negotiation with stalwart community resistance led by municipalists in the Burlington Greens and the Citizens to Protect the Waterfront that the waterfront land trust was established.

In more recent years, a renaissance of interest in radical municipalism and social ecology has been taking place as the global left takes interest in the Rojava Revolution in Northern Syria (2014-present). The Rojava Revolution, led by a multiethnic coalition emerging from Kurdish liberation activism, incorporates key elements of social ecology into its social paradigm — including the practice of village and neighborhood assemblies and regional federations. The Rojava Revolution also emphasized women's liberation. Rojava solidarity projects and reading groups throughout North America are therefore exposing a new generation to municipalist ideas. A small, but dedicated number US and Canadian citizens have travelled to volunteer as militia soldiers alongside Kurdish units in Northern Syria. Such interactions are stimulating critique within social ecology, as the Rojava Revolution places utmost importance on women's liberation.

Decolonial and Pan-African perspectives to social ecology are developing via groups like the ARIDSEE and Black Socialists of America. Direct democracy, according to this view, is hardly a white, European or even ancient “Greek” invention, but rather a diverse political world that colonization has tried — but ultimately failed — to choke off. For example, the Canadian Indian Act, which was first introduced in 1876, [outlawed](#) traditional tribal decision-making by consensus, dubbing it “irresponsible”. Decolonial social ecology also highlights the origins and persistence of social ecological principles within the traditional lifeways of Indigenous peoples, exploring, for example, how Indigenous groups succeeded in stewarding land for millennia.

Examples of prominent organisations

- > Institute for Social Ecology
Radical educational institute founded by Murray Bookchin and Dan Chodorkoff based Plainfield, Vermont. Early pioneer in ecological design and permaculture. Continues to offer online classes and annual seminars attended by radical municipalists and social ecologists from around the world. Founded in 1974.
- > Black Socialists of America
Dedicated to revitalizing the horizontal Black radical tradition. Promotes social ecology alongside a wide range of revolutionary thought. Develops tools and guides for economic democracy. Established in 2018.

- > **Autonomous Research Institute for Direct Democracy and Social Ecology (ARIDSEE)**
Based in Geechee, Georgia, home of an historically self-governing Black community. Work to revive knowledge about Black and Indigenous ways of relating to the land. Established in 2018.
- > **Inhabit**
A militant, decentralized network of insurrectionary social ecologists based in the US and Canada.
- > **Cooperative Assembly of Cascadia**
A Seattle-based collective working to raise consciousness about social ecology and direct democracy. Established in 2020.
- > **Symbiosis PDX**
Membership organization based in Portland, Oregon that is part of the Symbiosis confederation. They coordinate mutual aid, education projects, and anti-racist alliance work. Established in 2019.
- > **Symbiosis**
A network of dozens of radical municipalist organizations and sympathetic groups. In September 2019, Symbiosis held an international convergence of municipalist orgs in Detroit, Michigan called the Congress of Municipalist Movements. Established in 2018.

How they advance municipalist goals

- > Social ecologists teach municipalism as part of a broader revolutionary philosophy. The Institute for Social Ecology in Plainfield, Vermont has been teaching municipalist philosophy, theory, and history to global audiences since 1974.
- > Focus on education and transformation of thinking — rather than immediate struggles and campaigns — has created a durable base of people and relationships through which social ecology has kept municipalist ideas alive for decades.
- > Inspires movements and organizers to take a holistic understanding of society, including a new, organic conception of cities and local political institutions.
- > Reintegrates social, political, and ecological movements. Fosters an understanding of the city as an ‘eco-community’.

Challenges

- > Many groups based on social ecology principles struggle to expand beyond small cadre organizations. They have the advantage of acting collectively and decisively, which can give them a surprisingly significant influence on local politics. However, they can have difficulties going beyond their bubble and galvanizing popular mobilizations.

- > In part due to close associations with a dead white male theorist, and in part due to the continued need to reflect on issues of gender, race, and class, positions of power have historically been held primarily by white, university-educated men.
- > Struggle with the balance between abstract principles and engaging in practical organizing.

Further Reading

- > The New Municipal Movements
- > Symbiosis: Federating municipalist movements in North America for real democracy
- > The stories we need: pan-African social ecology
- > Of egg and chicken: A report back from the Symbiosis Federation Congress
- > We do it badly, or not at all: reflections on the Congress of Municipal Movements
- > Political organizing in the 21st century

Node 3 / Municipal socialism

Municipal socialism is a recent, yet essential part of the story of municipalism in Canada and the United States. This has largely been due to the renewal of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the grassroots elements of the 2016 and 2020 Bernie Sanders presidential campaigns. In Canada, similar initiatives have included The Leap and Courage. These democratic socialist organizations draw significant numbers — DSA alone has a membership of over 92,000 — attracting people across a wide ideological range including libertarian socialists, anarcho-communists, social democrats, democratic socialists, Marxist-Leninists, Trotskyists, and more.

The methods of these new-wave socialist organizations are distinct from those of traditional socialist parties. Firstly, they are not parties, but rather membership organizations. More importantly, they organize themselves into autonomous chapters, which has resulted in many individual chapters orienting themselves to issues and struggles at the local level. Their autonomy makes them free to select from a range of issues — from healthcare, tenant rights, energy democracy, public transportation, disaster relief, workers' rights, the fight against platform capitalism, and mutual aid. They are also effectively free to structure themselves democratically. Many local chapters have creatively adapted national campaigns such as the Green New Deal or Medicare for All to apply as local policy packages and platforms.

While many socialists may not identify themselves as municipalists, they are amenable to radical municipalist goals and gravitate toward many of the same ideas, tactics, and sensibilities. Economic democracy, autonomy at the local level, and revitalization of public life emerge as common themes and demands. Municipal socialists have campaigned for improved local

public transportation (Los Angeles), disaster relief (Texas), democratization of energy and utilities (California, New York, Puerto Rico), and public housing (Canada). In New York City, they effectively rejected a new Amazon headquarter and in Washington D.C. have mobilized significant campaigns against eviction and for tenant rights.

Municipalist and libertarian socialists have also had a democratizing influence on the democratic socialist movement. The radical municipalist wing of the DSA, the Libertarian Socialist Caucus, is the largest caucus in the organization, helping to influence debates about the DSA's priorities as well as how the organization is run.

How they advance municipalist goals

- Amenable to municipalist goals and practices via autonomous local chapters
- Organizes members face-to-face according to where they live, paving a way for ordinary people to get politically active and organized.
- Build community alliances by providing assistance and support to allies, such as campaigners for racial justice, disaster relief organizations, and tenant rights campaigns.
- Popularize municipalist ideas and increase democratic literacy. Significant proportion of membership engages with municipalist and libertarian socialist ideas.

Challenges

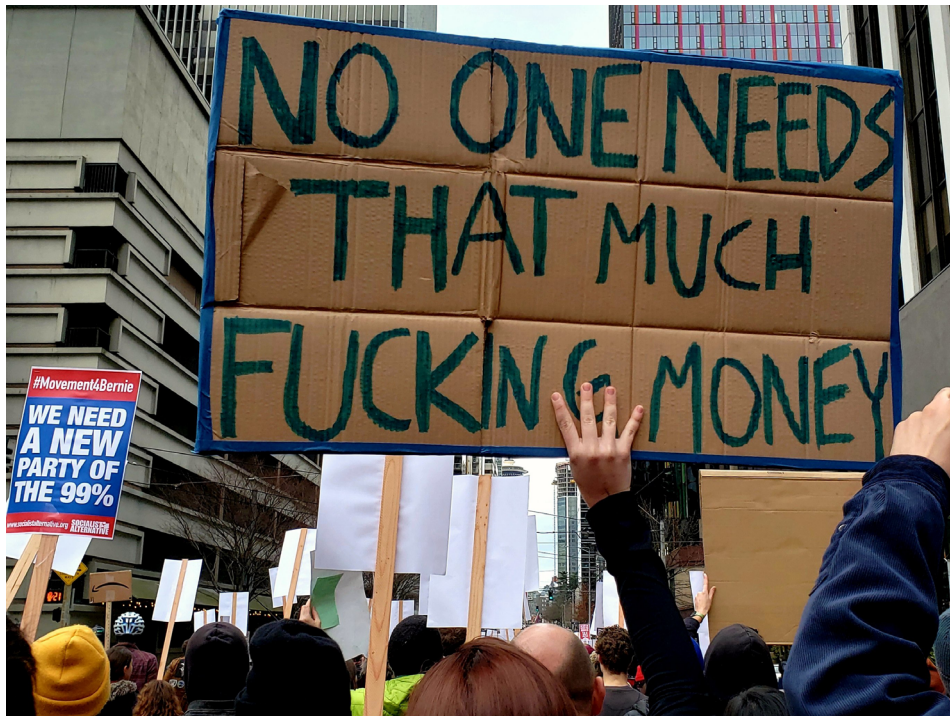
- Tension and conflict between national leadership and state and local organizers. National leadership of the DSA is dominated by state-centric social democrats with little interest in building a stateless society or a dual power strategy.
- Concentration on elections draws energy away from dual power-oriented work. A balance between popular education, dual power-oriented initiatives, and electoral work is needed.
- Technocratic tendencies mean college-educated leaders focus on advancing policy packages rather than base-building and establishing democratic institutions on the local level. Appeals to authority and experts come at the expense of building popular power.
- In Canada especially, socialists have failed to engage municipal politics, leaving a large opening for liberal greens and conservatives.

Further reading

- [Seattle flirts with 'municipal socialism'](#)
- [Seattle and the Socialist: The battle raging between Amazon and the far left](#)
- [Public Power in a Green City](#)
- [Power communities with energy democracy - Pathways to a People's Economy](#)
- [Public transportation is a human right](#)
- [Forget basic income / in Canada, the new normal should bring a public housing revolution](#)

- > Time for public power for New York
- > Socialize the Grid
- > These democratic socialists aren't just targeting incumbent politicians. They're going after slumlords and real-estate speculators.

Example: Seattle



Protest in Seattle for taxing Amazon. Source: William Murray (Flickr)

Seattle is home to Amazon, the company owned by the richest person in the world, Jeff Bezos. It is also home to the third greatest number of homeless people in the US. Since 2014, each year average rents grow by 12% while the homeless population grows by 9%. In this context, socialist activists have won the first \$15 minimum wage in the US. During the campaign, Seattle's DSA membership grew to 800 people. They twice helped elect Kshama Sawant of Socialist Alternative to city council. In 2018, the housing movement allied with socialists won a motion to tax large corporations and use the revenues to fund affordable housing. Unfortunately, Amazon led a corporate revolt which forced the city to repeal the tax shortly after. Seattle's municipal socialist movement is currently pushing hard for labor rights for domestic workers and ride-sharing app drivers.

The collective experiences of tenant unions and associations have brought a toolkit of strategies into widespread circulation. Tactics include rent strikes, mobilizing for rent control and eviction moratoriums, organizing housing cooperatives and land trusts, anti-gentrification struggles, social housing campaigns, and organizing houseless people (not homeless: they may feel at home somewhere, but they do not have a house). Land trusts and cooperatives, such as those developed in New York, are an essential part of building dual power. Rather than being just on the defense, these institutions point to a solution of taking real estate out of capital circulation and more democratic oversight over common wealth. The fact that many landlords own multiple properties in the same cities opens an opportunity for collective action among tenants. Projects like the [Anti-Eviction Mapping Project](#) in the San Francisco Bay Area build resources for struggling tenants to find one another.

How they advance municipalist goals

- Organizing where people live is a natural starting place for developing and scaling up popular power. Housing offers a stable site on which to base federations and raise common concerns, especially as the modern workplace is becoming increasingly precarious.
- Forcing concessions from the state and developers is a key means to build people power against capital. Real estate is the dominant site for capital investments and speculation, comprising 60% of capital worldwide.
- Practical goals and tangible gains powerfully demonstrate the possibility of alternative futures based on community empowerment. As tenants make collective demands for their rights to the city, political imaginations and desires are expanded.
- Connections may be drawn to the Spanish housing crisis in the early 2010s, which eventually helped to galvanize municipalist movements across the Iberian Peninsula including Barcelona en Comú. Organizing strategies similar to those of the PAH are being adopted. As the tenant rights movement becomes more militant and experienced, there will likely be new openings for radical municipalism.

Challenges

- Organizing tenants in rural and suburban contexts is challenging due to the low density of tenants and growing rural and suburban poverty.
- Local housing laws differ widely, making it difficult to replicate successful tactics.
- Alternatives to rental housing such as cooperative housing and land trusts often lack legal and financial support. Banks are reluctant to provide loans to initiatives without state-level or provincial-level support.
- The transition from organizing around tenants' immediate struggles to broader societal demands can be a difficult one. Tenants may wish to end organizing after a fight is won (or lost). Channeling these struggles to a wider dual power strategy remains elusive.

Further reading

- > [This is Parkdale](#). A documentary by Submedia.tv about a rent strike in Parkdale, Toronto.
- > [Toronto tenants fighting a class war they cannot afford to lose](#)
- > [L.A. tenants union rejects legislative compromises, affirms dual power](#)
- > [Organizing the suburbs](#)
- > [Largest rent strike in nearly a century amid coronavirus crisis](#)
- > [The tenants who evicted their landlord](#)
- > [How Philly's Black Lives Matter protests revitalized the affordable housing movement](#)
- > [No job, no rent](#). A 30-page report by the Stomp Out Slumlords tenants rights project on 10 months of organizing the tenant struggle during a pandemic.
- > [How to organize your building](#)

Example: Canadian tenant activism



A protest for the right to housing in Park Extension, Montreal. Source: Comité d'action de Parc-Extension.

Working class people in Canada's big cities are currently under tremendous pressure as wealthy people buy up lucrative investment properties and evict renters from their homes and as large investment companies buy up disinvested apartment buildings and rent them out at exorbitant rates. This has led to a massive houselessness crisis across Canada, with an alarming number of people living in tent cities along the streets.

In Toronto, renters in the culturally diverse, working class neighborhood of Parkdale have organized rent strikes and won important concessions from

corporate landlords. During the pandemic, the group Parkdale Organize led a successful campaign, Keep Your Rent, which kicked off a chain of rent strikes in the city. Through their support, tenants have blocked evictions, packed court hearings, and started to build the popular power needed to demand an alternative to the capitalist housing market.

In Montreal, a federation of neighborhood housing committees, RCLALQ, has mobilized to expand social housing and fight evictions due to the pandemic. In the predominantly immigrant neighborhood of Park Extension, tenants have won key victories against gentrification, including the construction of social housing units where condominiums were previously slated to be built. In other neighborhoods, organizers have fought to turn disused public land into community centers, cooperatives, and land trusts. The Milton Park community, which hosts the largest network of housing cooperatives in North America, has become a hub for activism on cooperative housing and the right to the city.

Node 5 / Mutual aid networks



Member of Symbiosis PDX delivering fresh eggs during the Covid-19 pandemic, as part of their mutual aid activities. Source: Symbiosis PDX.



Members of Cooperation Milwaukee supporting mutual aid projects during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Source: Cooperation Milwaukee.

Mutual aid is a relationship of collective, reciprocal support and care practiced as political action. It is born often out of necessity in moments of chaos and despair; neighbors helping neighbors. Mutual aid is embedded in anarchist history, such as in the trans-local organization Food Not Bombs, which provides hot meals for free and food by donation. Mutual aid also has a history in Canadian social unionism, through which labor unions organized food banks and material relief for households whose income had disappeared due to the collapse of industries like mining or forestry.

With intensifying climate crisis and social upheaval over the last decade, mutual aid has come center stage in North America. Hurricanes, wildfires, mass protests, pandemics — each successive crisis has resulted in a surge of new mutual aid initiatives. These projects do everything from creating bail funds for arrested protesters to supporting migrants making the journey across borders; from food provisioning to disaster relief.

Municipalist organizations have been well placed to respond to crises because they are often already providing resources and/or have connections to those who do so. In Jackson, Mississippi, Cooperation Jackson has been fighting the Covid-19 pandemic at the same time as a regional water crisis. In Portland, Oregon, Symbiosis PDX arose as a crucial node for food distribution during the pandemic and have offered support to Indigenous nations in the areas. In Montreal, Canada, municipalists were involved in setting up mutual aid networks in underserved and marginalized neighborhoods during the pandemic.

Mutual aid tends to be more successful when it is approached as a means to an end and part of a long-term strategy. You can't predict when disasters are going to happen, but when they do, horizontally organized organizations engaging in mutual aid can become crucial both for surviving the crisis and for growing the movement. In moments of crisis, people are going to enact what they see around them. If what they see around them is authoritarian, or a paternalistic charity model, that kind of response is what they will turn to. But if people see neighbors helping each other in a prefigurative way, that kind of relationship will become commonsense following moments of crisis or large-scale social transformation—when the time comes for rebuilding and reform.

How they advance municipalist goals

- Mutual aid is a major point of access for political activity and encourages people to become active in local political struggles and campaigns.
- It demonstrates — rather than dictates — that human beings can build fulfilling social and economic relationships outside the constraints of scarcity and private property. It offers tangible benefits that allows people to imagine more potentialities of collective action.
- Mutual aid can bring people together from different class and racial backgrounds, cultivating face-to-face alliances and a sense of community solidarity.
- Engaging in mutual aid also promotes trust and alliances between organizations, further advancing the goal of dual power.
- Mutual aid, especially in times of disaster, often has a radicalizing effect on those involved.

Challenges

- Mutual aid initiatives can get stuck at the level of provisioning with organizers left overwhelmed with providing immediate assistance. This leads to burnout and unequal distributions of labor.
- Many initiatives evaporate once a crisis or disaster has passed. Scaling up power and developing a long-term strategy often fall by the wayside.
- Although driven by good intentions, some mutual aid initiatives fail to incorporate a critical analysis and/or address dynamics of class and race. They can become indistinguishable from volunteer-run charity organizations.
- For all of these reasons, it is crucial to develop networks and resources for mutual aid organizing, including popular education, human resources and support for organizers, and planning before the next crisis strikes.

Further reading

- [During Puerto Rico's blackout, solar microgrids kept the lights on](#)
- [Puerto Rico: The shift from mass protests to people's assemblies](#)
- [Disaster collectivism: How communities rise together to respond to crises](#)

- > Mutual aid networks go beyond disaster relief. They offer community empowerment
- > List of resources and guides on how to do mutual aid during a pandemic
- > From mutual aid to dual power in the state of emergency
- > Mutual aid response during fires shows Black Lives Matter is building community
- > Collective care is our best weapon against COVID-19 / Mutual aid disaster relief
- > Emancipatory mutual aid: from education to liberation

Example: Puerto Rico



Casa Pueblo in Puerto Rico was at the center of relief efforts in the city of Adjuntas and has helped to inspire energy autonomy initiatives across the island. Source: Facebook

In 2017, Hurricane Maria hit the US-occupied island of Puerto Rico, killing thousands, taking out the island's power and clean water, causing billions of dollars in damages, and decimating 80% of the island's agriculture. Despite the enormous scale of the catastrophe, the US's national disaster relief agency, FEMA, responded slowly and inadequately. The people of the island were effectively left to their own devices.

Democratically organized community organizations were central to the bottom-up response after the devastation brought by Hurricane Maria. When the city of Adjuntas was cast into darkness, the only lights left on were in the democratically-run community center, Casa Pueblo, which had installed an off-grid solar panel system years before. Casa Pueblo immediately became a hub for relief for those without food or medical supplies, offering power for people to charge their phones and supplying electricity for elderly patients

dialysis machines, and producing solar lamps and mini-fridges for people in the area. Following Casa Pueblo's success, community organizations across the island began installing off-grid solar power. Two years after Hurricane Maria, the whole island rose in protest against the corrupt government. Protestors held local assemblies in every town and city, inspired by a tradition of direct democracy on the island. The example of Casa Pueblo shows how organizations that are already well established, run according to democratic principles, can quickly become a crucial support for entire communities during times of disaster and crisis. In turn, their position can help inspire others by showing that an alternative way of doing politics and organizing the economy is possible.

Node 6 / Indigenous resurgence

Practices of direct democracy, solidarity economy, communal autonomy and interdependence have flourished among Indigenous peoples for centuries and even millennia before the North American continent was settled by Europeans. First Nations peoples continue to practice them today, even in the face of state oppression, incarceration, gendered violence, and corporate exploitation of their land. Although Indigenous movements are inherently distinct from Western social and political movements like radical municipalism and cannot be subsumed as a “part” of them, it is crucial to acknowledge and discuss them in order to understand the roots of radical municipalist politics in North America, as well as to explore emerging, cross-cultural patterns in social movements.

In the past decade, Indigenous struggles such as the protest camps at Standing Rock and Unist'ot'en, litigation in the US and Canadian courts (2016-2017), the outcry against missing and murdered Indigenous women, Idle No More (2012) and Land Back (2020) movements have occupied an increasingly visible position in the contemporary political landscape. These mobilizations emerge from a broader social turn which Kanien'kehá:ka professor Gerald Taiaiake Alfred calls an "Indigenous resurgence", a process which involves a renewal of the relationship between Indigenous peoples, their culture, and the land — along with direct resistance and a rejection of state attempts at pacification.

In 2018, Indigenous land defenders and water protectors began to encapsulate their demands with a simple but challenging slogan: land back. Land back means reasserting a commitment to Indigenous legal frameworks and treaties which govern relationships for Indigenous nations and which they continue to uphold despite centuries of broken treaties by settler colonial states.

Land back is not about property ownership or financial reparations, but about transforming our relationship to land in a way that ensures the flourishing of the peoples and cultures who originally took care of the land. Land back promises mutual and democratic respect for all those who live on the land — including non-humans.

Practices of mutual aid and solidarity economics have always been important to Indigenous peoples and nations across North America. A key feature of Indigenous protest camps and resistance movements has been the development of autonomous economic and cultural infrastructures such as a healing center built by the Wet'suwet'en at the Unist'ot'en camp and the tiny houses built by Secwepemc warriors. During the Covid-19 crisis, anarchist Navajo organizers engaged in mutual aid to directly support people with protective equipment and food. In recent years, Indigenous nations have also sought to develop sustainable and appropriate technologies in their territories, as well as reintroduce bison and native plants.

There are also important connections between Indigenous resurgence and radical municipalism. A first and important fact is that ideas of democracy and humanism, often associated with European civilization, were initially inspired through contact between Europeans and Indigenous peoples in the so-called Americas. Second is that municipalist struggles can learn from Indigenous movements that powerful militancy is based on the abolition of patriarchy, relationships of care, and community-building in day-to-day life. In the words of Cree author Mike Gouldhawke in *Midnight Sun* magazine: "The strength behind Indigenous resistance flows from our community roots, and our sense of relationality, with each other and with all of our surroundings, living or otherwise... Such relations are the building blocks of the blockade, social as much as physical... The networks of solidarity that make the blockade possible can be built in every struggle against the landlord, the boss, and the police – representatives of a system that all oppressed people stand to benefit from tearing down."

Further reading

- > Building blocks
- > How the women of Standing Rock are building sovereign economies
- > Wet'suwet'en solidarity: "This movement wouldn't exist without everything that preceded it"
- > The Red Deal is an Indigenous climate plan that builds on the Green New Deal
- > Water is life: Nick Estes on Indigenous technologies
- > Land back: A yellowhead institute red paper
- > Land as a social relationship
- > Indigenous leadership points the way out of the COVID crisis
- > In the Navajo Nation, Anarchism has indigenous roots
- > Opinion: 'Land Back' is more than a slogan for a resurgent Indigenous movement

Example: The Unist'ot'en Protest Camp



A 2020 Wet'suwet'en Solidarity protest blocking a railway in Toronto, Canada. Source: [Jason Hargrove](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

In 2019-20, the Wet'suwet'en First Nations people barred the Coastal GasLink Pipeline from being constructed on their land in British Columbia. When a group of Wet'suwet'en land defenders (primarily women) were forcefully arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous allies responded by organizing protests and blockades of railroads and pipelines across the country that had a significant impact on the Canadian economy. In every city across Canada, people, many of whom were in the radical municipalist movements, travelled to railroads and infrastructural choke-points to support this struggle. This movement became a wake-up call for many in Canada that Indigenous struggles for self-determination cannot be sidelined or considered peripheral to the movement. The same holds for municipal movements, which have since increasingly sought to build links with Indigenous nations and support their actions. The movement thus helped to cement the links between municipalist issues and extractive industry and fossil capital.

How they work toward municipalist goals

- Linking resistance with resurgence, North American Indigenous movements show that consensual governance is intimately connected to territorial organizing, solidarity economies, and resistance to colonial states.
- Highlight the importance of relationships with the land and non-humans for genuine political autonomy.
- Offer examples of legal systems based on consent and relationship-building, instead of private property and settler colonial violence. Municipalist practices of direct democracy, consent-based decision-making, and delegate spokescouncils—where individuals are nominated as delegates for a group in a council of councils—are directly informed by such Indigenous legal traditions.
- Many Indigenous nations are matrilineal and have well-developed institutions to fight patriarchy within the household and in their governance systems. Organizing is often led by women, LGBTQ, and two-spirit people. This can provide lessons and be an inspiration for the feminization of urban politics, through offering an example of what anti-patriarchal organizing can look like.

Challenges

- Settler municipal governance is imposed on Indigenous nations. For many Indigenous people, 'municipalism' connotes a colonial system of law based on private property and individual self-interest, rather than collective deliberation. There is a need to reconsider Western assumptions about the nature of politics as well as to collaborate and develop a mutually satisfying vocabulary.
- Municipalist movements tend to overlook Indigenous issues. In the US, 70% of Indigenous people live in urban areas, while in Canada, 56% of Indigenous people live in urban areas. Indigenous issues are therefore not just rural issues but are also important for urban municipalist movements.
- Municipal movements generally lack alliances and solidarity with local Indigenous peoples in their regions. Such alliances would entail learning and respecting treaties, acknowledging and self-educating about the Nations on whose land they are located, promoting decolonial policies at the municipal level, and actively incorporating decolonization into their goals.

Questions and provocations

In the previous section, we sought to give the reader a sense of how radical municipalists and close allies organize themselves throughout the US and Canada. In that process, we have also briefly indicated some of the successes and challenges they have encountered in their work. In this section, we synthesize several of these points into key themes, flagging common obstacles and opportunities for the future. If we imagine the radical municipalist movement as a ship navigating difficult waters, here is where we point to the rocks and to safe passage. As we shall see, such dilemmas help explain what is distinctive about municipalism in the US and Canada and hold lessons and provocations for movements abroad.

To professionalize or not to professionalize?

As radical municipalists create experiments at the margins of civil society and political institutions, they face the dilemma of whether to institutionalize their movements and the pressure to find stable sources of funding. Especially in the US, where there is a significant absence of state-funded civil society, social movement campaigns and non-profit organizations spend much of their time in the pursuit of funds from private foundations and/or individual donors. Forced to compete for money from the social elite, they also must present themselves as palatable and friendly to an ever-shrinking donor class. Moreover, national election finance and tax laws impose strict divisions between social activism and political campaigns, making it impossible for social service organizations, advocacy groups, and protest campaigns under the category 501.3 to organize or participate directly in even local elections.

Professionalization can appear appealing at first because it offers both legitimacy and the opportunity to stabilize funding channels. However, as divisions inevitably arise between paid, full-time staff and citizens-turned-"volunteers", the delicate balance of power necessary for a horizontal organization falls apart. Paid organizing gigs tend to draw social movement leaders away from communities by offering people careers — or even just creating the perception of offering a career.

But these issues persist in Canada, where the state does often fund civil society initiatives. To take one example, in Quebec, projects such as clinics, gardens, housing committees, and so on that were once autonomous, democratically-run, and beholden to citizens have now become absorbed into the state welfare system, where they depend fully upon state funding. In other words, their professionalization meant their depoliticization. The Quebec tenant rights movement is almost entirely led by professionals who, although well-meaning, routinely stymie popular unrest and direct action by dominating discussions and setting up hidden barriers to entry and participation.

This political economy — sometimes called the “non-profit industrial complex” — is especially problematic for municipalists who want to dissolve the stratum that divides professional politicians and city managers from communities and citizens. While proposals such as “universal basic services” may align naturally with municipalism, they also carry a danger of neutralizing movements by making them dependent on the state. The task for municipalists then is to think ahead about how such policies can work toward being independent from state-led de-politicization, as well as to find ways of making them more democratic. On the other hand, many initiatives may have to think ahead about how to survive without stable financing or labor, as well as how to make their activities accessible to poor and working class people while using limited resources. Either way, municipalists must think carefully about how and when to institutionalize and formalize their operations, assessing the benefits of different paths available depending on the local context.

The allure of elections

How should movements that valorize and advance ideals like “grassroots popular power” and “direct democracy” define these values? Should elections be engaged in only as propaganda for direct democracy or should municipalists focus on seemingly achievable local reforms? In the pursuit of experiments involving social activism and local political institutions, how should they interact with elections? Can activists in office be expected to offer real change? Is the practice of “real democracy” possible in the messy real world?

There is no single or easy answer. However, it’s clear the solution is not so straightforward as running activist candidates for office. To take one high-profile example, Cooperation Jackson was a key actor in a movement that elected activist Chokwe Lumumba, and later his son, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, to the position of mayor of Jackson, Mississippi. Because Lumumba died soon after taking office, his son Antar Lumumba’s election was widely considered a major victory for radical municipalism. Within the movement, however, questions were brewing as to whether the movement had committed too early to an electoral strategy; critiques mounted that the campaign had sapped precious strength from a movement that still needed time to grow. Moreover, it was unclear how Antar Lumumba would stay true to the movement’s goals and commitments once he had assumed office.

Cooperation Jackson is not the only municipalist project that has considered whether they ran candidates too early — that is, before a revolutionary consciousness and praxis could take root among the populace. We might also look to the municipalist socialists, who apply tremendous energy and scarce resources that might otherwise be used for base building to elections every two years. Radical municipalists, alongside anarchists and libertarian socialists, have critiqued this impulse to focus on electoral strategies, but struggled to build durable alternatives. The problem, of course, is not unique to this region; other movements such as those in Spain and

Latin America have faced similar questions—and so have decolonization movements which eventually sought independence through nation-building. In this, radical municipalists in the US and Canada could learn from, and build ties with, international movements to advance their own analysis of these issues.

Many municipalist initiatives also struggle to maintain their principles of direct democracy. Direct democracy requires a lot of time and sets up barriers to entry for those with little free time. We have noticed, both through personal experience and through discussions with our networks, that direct democratic institutions tend to waver over time and ultimately radical municipalist projects become whittled down to a small, but often more efficient, cadre who act strategically to advance municipalist principles. Here, communication between local municipalist initiatives can go a long way in sharing resources, lessons, and strategies to overcome this barrier.

Municipalism beyond the city

Internationally, municipalist initiatives have attributed a special significance to the city. Urban spaces are by definition dense, multi-racial, and multi-class. Cities are where diverse peoples, cultures, and living things come together. Politically, they tend to lean progressive. They seem, therefore, to be the perfect staging ground for municipalist ideals. However, in North America, this thinking quickly runs into all kinds of trouble.

Gentrification has already hollowed out the urban cores of most large US and Canadian cities. In many places, poor and working class people were forced to move to the suburbs decades ago. With the Covid-19 pandemic, one might expect to see the rich flee from city centers. Instead, especially in Canada, real estate speculation on city centers rose and the rich who did move went to ex-urban areas (i.e. luxury cottages). In fact, this speaks to a new reality: downtown cores are emptying out and existing as mere sites of speculation; the poor reside in the suburbs which lack the working class services that characterized the city center half a century ago; and the rich live in wealthy country villas—a new form of rural gentrification.

Despite this, most social movements continue to orbit around the city center. Standard practices like protesting in front of town hall, occupying plazas, and setting up pop-up info tables in busy intersections all reflect this. It seems that nobody really knows how to organize in the suburbs or how to bring together the disparate groups that make up the suburbs. The same can be said about rural areas and issues. In a context where rural social fabric is increasingly threadbare, and where the food we all need to survive is increasingly produced by exploited migrant labor, rural issues are crucial. Indeed, the electoral map in both Canada and the United States is more divided than ever between progressive urban cores, mixed suburban peripheries, and rightwing rural expanses.

Suburbanization is a growing phenomenon around the globe, especially in the Global South. It

is thus possible that in the next few decades, lessons learned in the United States and Canada about how to transition from urban to suburban and rural organizing will offer valuable lessons for municipalists internationally. The reverse is true as well, and perhaps more so: as suburbanization is so prevalent in the Global South, and so different than in the Global North, there may be lessons for organizing drawn from these realities that could inform Global North movements.

Second, there is the issue of more explicitly linking urban problems with infrastructural and logistical flows and colonial institutions and capitalist operations of extraction. Urban spaces are connected to the rest of the world through complex supply chains, owned by oligopolies, as well as infrastructures like highways, waterways, ports, and railroads—many of which are largely out of sight of urban life. In addition, a majority of Indigenous peoples not only reside in cities, but also, Indigenous communities face the brunt of the extractive economy that makes city life possible. For this reason, municipalists need to think beyond the city and link municipalist organizing to worker solidarity in logistics distribution centers (e.g. Amazon, ports), material and energetic flows (e.g. pipelines, water sources, renewable energy), and Indigenous solidarity.

Conclusion / Key lessons for international municipalism

At first glance, radical municipalism in Canada and the US is less advanced than it is in many other countries. Indeed, unlike in several European and Latin American cities, there are very few stable organizations on which to hang one's expectation of a coherent narrative. Extreme economic precarity, social instability, and political inequality contribute to a hostile environment in which it is extremely difficult to maintain a citizen's platform or party — let alone any kind of sustained political movement. Despite this, the international municipalist movement has much to learn from the radical municipalist experiments in these two countries.

Demands for racial justice and decolonization are arguably the defining struggles of the contemporary US and Canada. Although a great deal more work needs to be done to build multi-racial alliances and to support Indigenous struggles, municipalists in these two countries can be looked to as examples for how to organize. In the US and Canada, decolonization and anti-racist work are increasingly being seen as interconnected—after all, race is one of the main pillars of class division in both countries. Decolonial politics are merging with municipalism as resistance movements led by colonized people prioritize direct democracy and federations not only as a new expression of autonomy and self-determination, but as a renewed form of cultural and political revitalization. A tide of decolonizing municipalist projects including Puerto Rico, Canadian Indigenous resurgence and alliances, and the Black cooperativist tradition is rising.

Finally, the North American experience also highlights the close, self-reinforcing relationship between prefigurative organizing and times of crisis. In the past decade, the North American continent has been besieged by natural and human-made disasters — massive Mississippi floods, Atlantic hurricanes, West Coast Wildfires. The ability of communities to navigate these crisis depends on the radical, directly-democratic organizing that precedes these disasters. For example, mutual aid networks developed in the spring of 2020 to address Covid-19 were crucial in helping protestors in the George Floyd uprising just weeks later. Each new initiative puts the left in a stronger position to help mitigate the effects of the next disaster, as well as inspires people to become interested in radical municipalism. From Cooperation Jackson, Mississippi to Woodbine, New York, Casa Pueblo, Puerto Rico, Parkdale, Toronto, to mutual aid in Indigenous nations, radical municipalist organizations and their allies are well-placed to show what "disaster communism" can look like.

Radical municipalism in North America is still a nascent movement. It continues to look for an identity and a language of its own. Some of the areas above may never come to align as a democratically coordinated force. Nevertheless, we can look at their commonalities and see a unique constellation of actors and forces that are infusing a new, municipalist spirit and sensibility into North American social movements.