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Examining Barcelona en Comú's attempt to be a movement-party

Andreea Zelinka

*“What happens in Barcelona will not be decided by only us,
it will be decided between all of us.”*

– Member of the assembly of Ciutat Vella

When the massive protests that occupied public squares in Spain (known as 15M) ended in 2011, many activists argued that real change could only occur if they took over political institutions. So in 2015 new municipal candidates set out to defend the claims and practices made during 15M within public institutions throughout the territory of Spain. In 2014 a group of social and political activists in Barcelona, Guanyem Barcelona, set the goal to collect 30,000 signatures from city residents supporting their participation in the municipal elections in 2015. The signatures were collected rapidly and the citizens' platform Barcelona en Comú was formed through a confluence of different political organizations. Against all odds, they won the elections and Ada Colau became the new mayor of the city. Ever since, Barcelona en Comú has formed a minority government in the city hall of Barcelona.¹

Barcelona en Comú's goal is to democratize the relationship between civil society and city institutions by transforming the traditional structures of political parties and creating new forms of democratic political participation. Based on the idea of radical democracy, they seek to establish a co-production of public politics and a co-responsibility for political decision-making. Central to this idea is, thus, a new kind of institution, a so-called movement-party. But is it possible for a political organization to be movement and institution at the same time? Which kind of challenges, conflicts and opportunities emerge through this undertaking? And how do new institutions behave?

Innovations in political practices

There are two important organizational and ideological developments within Barcelona en Comú to be considered in order to answer these questions. The first is the shift to the local, namely the integration of and emphasis on political engagement of ordinary citizens. As a result of the 15M and previous struggles, deliberative practices were already widely established.² Thus, the movement was able to go beyond established activist circles, mobilize the citizenry, reject the participation of political parties and introduce an open-structured network.³ Internal organizational principles of horizontality, self-organization, direct or participatory democracy and diversity were central.⁴ The process sought to activate the social and political capacities among citizens and the neighbourhoods' social fabric. This was done within public assemblies, first on the squares and then in the neighbourhoods. The practice survived the occupations of 15M and is now an integral part of Barcelona en Comú.

Asamblearismo is considered one of the most important tools of political participation among political actors of Barcelona en Comú. It aims at creating consensus through discussions in which each voice is equally represented. Through encounter, reflection and discussion of issues of public concern, a process of collective engagement and decision-making is initiated. In the spirit of the municipalist movements, the shift to the local also refers to the specific local issues people from neighbourhoods face while living in the city. Their capacity to identify problems as well as propose solutions concerning issues such as infrastructure, working hours, housing evictions is crucial.

Of course, the discussions implicitly understand the broader context of government decisions and (geo-)political manoeuvrings and therefore include a critique on austerity measures, democratic deficits and authoritarianism. This is represented in the claim for the right to the city, 'not as a right to that which already exists, but as a right to rebuild and re-create the city (...) that eradicates poverty and social inequality (...)'.⁵ In other words, the right to self-determination and engagement in the creation of, what Arjun Appadurai calls, collective horizons.⁶

To provide for this right, the process of creating the government's municipal and districts' plan (*Pla d'Actuació Municipal (PAM)*) and *Plans d'Actuació dels deu districtes de la ciutat (PAD)* was designed to be as participative as possible. Over one-and-a-half months around 300 assemblies were held all over Barcelona. Experts and neighbours, youngsters and seniors participated equally in the assembly to create concrete proposals for their common urban space.

The shift to the present

Barcelona en Comú entered electoral politics with the objective to change the daily life of institutions. They try to incorporate social movements, neighbourhood associations and assemblies in the daily routine of institutional politics. Further, they are now making alliances, initiating collaborations and supporting corporations and agencies whose interests coincide with the interest of the citizenry and not those of the political or financial elites.⁷ Their goal is to reinforce the creation of urban commons which means to strengthen social bonds and a sense of community in the city. As Theodoros Karyotis puts it: 'Ultimately, it can become a place of resistance and self-determination, a place of inclusion; inclusion not only in the sense of formal rights granted by an instance of power, but in the sense of full participation of all different identities and subjects in political, economic and social life.'⁸

However, proposing new forms of democratic practices makes visible the tensions between the ideal of the political vision and the reality of political practice. According to Jessica Greenberg, democracy is always profoundly contradictory and flawed when measured against idealized moments and normative expectations.⁹ Her study on the post-revolutionary Serbian Youth movement after the overthrow of Milošević shows the challenges between being a former political activist and becoming an official working in state institutions. Trying to live up to one's own and other's expectations and ideals, participants experienced deep frustrations about the political reality of democracy. Thus, Serbian students "articulated their politics within a pragmatic present that was inevitably incomplete, partial, contradictory and disappointing".¹⁰ Their management of the contradictions of democratic practices resulted in an 'anti-utopian pragmatic politics of the present'.¹¹

Against this backdrop, the second political innovation that can be observed within Barcelona en Comú is the shift to the present. Political actors in city hall have to constantly manage their own expectations and frustrations and those of fellow militants in other areas of the organization. It is soon apparent that democratic praxis is inherently flawed as it can only approximate to a political ideal. Actors of Barcelona en Comú have therefore understood that there is no reaching for a utopian future when the questions of equitable redistribution and modes of (re-)production are seemingly answered by (traditionally) one established party. Their realization is that there

is only an everyday struggle of (re-)creating the conditions of life and coexistence for which the present is the battleground. Through constant negotiation of internal and external organizational principles and the support of sustainable policy making, democratization can only be achieved in the long-term through day-to-day actions.

Barcelona en Comú – a citizens' proposal

Barcelona en Comú is a heterogeneous political organization made up of people coming from diverse political and social backgrounds and social movements. For members it is perceived as a citizens' platform to listen to and integrate city inhabitants in bringing about change from within civil society. Only a minority of its members had previous experiences in institutional politics, such as those from Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds.¹² The emphasis on individual political participation during 15M was developed further within Barcelona en Comú as a system of confluence, where every person has an equal voice within the political organization, no matter from which organization they originally come from.

There are around 1,500 people in the registry of activists of Barcelona en Comú which constitutes the general plenum. The plenum is a space of political decision-making within the political organization. In the core of the organization there is the municipal group and the general coordinating group. The latter includes representatives of all districts, thematic groups, commissions and neighbourhoods as well sympathizers. Within the city hall, however, it is the municipal group which has executive powers. The group is formed by the mayor, city councillors and secretaries. For militants of the assembly the difference between general coordination and municipal group is not always clear. However, the municipal group represents the top levels of the political organization, as these are the people who were elected from the assemblies into office. Then, there are the thematic groups (working on different topics such as gender and sexual diversity, education etc.) and territorial assemblies of the districts. The latter are organized by districts which encompass different neighbourhoods. One of them is the city center of Barcelona called Ciutat Vella (old town) which includes El Raval, La Barceloneta, el Gòtic and Sant Pere, Santa Caterina i la Ribera. In these assemblies, neighbourhood matters and actions are discussed, but the debates mostly evolve around internal organizational issues and the relation between the assembly and the institution (municipal group). In spite of the fact that the neighbourhood assembly is the most local entity, it is exactly here where controversial debates about political strategies and organizational principles most often take place.

The assembly of Ciutat Vella

The assembly of Ciutat Vella takes place in a community centre in El Gòtic that provides a shared space for various neighbourhood initiatives and associations, political groups (i.a. CUP, BComú, 15M), and others. It usually takes place every 15 days. In the main room, the moderator and the minute-keeper sit on a long wooden table with a bench. The majority of the participants sit on white plastic chairs forming a circle around the table. The number of participants range between 12 and 20. The discussion is organized by an agenda set up by beforehand online by members of the assembly online. Some agenda items are fixed, such as the so-called 'return' (report) of

the municipal group and the 'return' of the territorial coordinating committee, in which elected representatives working in the institution 'return' to the assembly to report the past 15 days. Every other agenda item can be proposed by members of the assembly a week in advance. When the agenda proposals are supported by others online, they are introduced into the assembly agenda.

According to one member, the assembly attempts to be the eyes and ears and the voice of the organization in the territory. Thus, it is considered as an extension of the city hall. It is not seen, however, as another office for politicians of Barcelona en Comú to hold speeches but a space where citizens, militants and representatives meet. Therefore, it is not necessary to be a party-member in order to participate and 'you don't even have to be in favour of the party. You can come and moan, and you will still have your place.'¹³

Opinions diverge, however, regarding the access to the assembly. A member of the Ciutat Vella assembly who is as well a city hall representative noted: 'The assembly is for people of Ciutat Vella, which is made up by 120-130 active participants. 20-30 people come to the assembly. It is a typical assembly with an order of the day, topics for discussions. Neighbours criticize a lot, especially the government. It is typically not open for everyone, because there are a lot of internal organizational issues discussed. Everyone has absolute freedom of expression, and there are also votes held on issues that concern party members. So if lots of external people attend, it could be difficult to have a proper vote. Therefore, we also hold more public events outside the assembly. Still it is not hard to join – just write an email that you are interested to come and it's done. Nevertheless, we have to be attentive, because a lot of information is discussed in the assembly concerning the organization, internal issues, topics, activities and so on.'¹⁴

Another assembly member and street artist¹⁵ considers the assembly the most powerful political innovation within Barcelona en Comú, because the participation and presence of the elected representatives is a permanent feature. He explained his personal experience of fighting for the rights of street artists many years before Barcelona en Comú. If one wanted to meet a district official, it was necessary to fill out a note, leave it at the city hall and s/he would decide whether or not and when a meeting was scheduled. Now, there was a regular occasion institutionalized within the governing party to meet one's representative personally. This is something that 'needs to be cultivated, maintained and nurtured'¹⁶ – words that indicate a kind of growth which necessitates process and time to become reality. Regardless, the institutionalization of spaces of encounter between citizens and officials is already creating a democratic culture beyond public institutions.

This entails certain new characteristics for the political representatives. The most important is proximity to the people and the neighbourhood. This is evident in Barcelona en Comú's implementation of an ethical code which limits the terms of mandates and imposes a wage limit for the representatives. However, this proximity also has to be actively lived in the everyday lives of the neighbourhoods. Ideologically, assembly members emphasize that by being accessible and approachable to the citizenry and by staying open, to listen to and understand them, it is possible to establish and maintain good relations between the institution and citizens.¹⁷

The assembly is only one form for doing this. It can help proposals and topics from neighbourhoods effectively reach the executive branches in the government. However, there is constant debate

about the role of the assembly, the relation between movement and institution and a critique of a lack of internal democracy and communication. When assemblies feel unheard, members organize internal protests to demand better communication and interaction and an enhanced role for the assembly. This is necessary, because other political parties such as PSC, Ciutadans, and PP who form part of the city hall but do not have assemblies in their own organizational party structures. For them the assemblies of the districts are without significance. Militants of Barcelona en Comú, thus, hope to provoke structural change by strengthening the assembly, creating a participatory organism that can hold representatives accountable and recognise their identity as citizen and militant.

Internal conflicts

All of these changes are very slow and conflictual. In 2016, a proposed pact with PSC – the Catalan version of the Socialist Party which governed the city for 20 years before an interlude of *Convergència i Unió* and the eventual election of the current government of Barcelona en Comú – was hotly debated over the course of four to six weeks.¹⁸ In April, some participants of the assembly expressed fears that PSC would enter the government and use their spaces of power to dominate the city hall. Although there were also views on the pact as a possible strategic support, the dominant sentiment was that, ‘we feel badly treated and ignored’ by the institutional branch of Barcelona en Comú.

The May *Ciutat Vella* assembly prompted strong emotions. The assembly minute-taker stated, ‘I am not in favour. I am not in Barcelona en Comú to allow things to go like this. I am here, because I think that political decisions can be made together and with an active participation of people. I will vote for no.’ A woman in her 30s commented, ‘Do we want a government which is competent and able to act and which is different from the one before? If we don’t want the pact with PSC, we should maybe write a letter or something, because in a vote, it is not possible to say why not.’ Another woman said, ‘We won, because we want to do a different kind of politics, we want to do politics in a different way. With PSC this is not possible. My stomach hurts from this vote. Should I be pragmatic? I don’t know how to deal with this vote.’ Another female member argued, ‘We want to show the citizens that we are able to make a pact. I would be happy about a Yes. The justice system and the administration are hard to mobilize. I don’t think that everyone is lost. There are chances for synergies’.

The discussion showed a diversity of opinions. A top-down decision by the municipal group to vote on a pact with PSC caused de-motivation among members of Barcelona en Comú. It threatened the quality of the relationship between assemblies and the municipal group, even though it was commonly acknowledged that it was a very difficult situation and the pact was probably necessary in order to be able to govern. The common worry among participants was that PSC would go on working passively without any motivation for change nor any deeper connection to the citizens. Most importantly, however, they criticized a lack of sufficient internal discussions about the terms of the pact. This was seen by many members as weakening the political organization entirely.

After the vote took place and approved the pact with PSC, the councilwoman of *Ciutat Vella*, Gala Pin, accounted for the insufficient decision-making process and assured that their unrest and

dissatisfaction had been heard. However, the critique and problems identified by the Ciutat Vella assembly were also present in all other assemblies and other participatory spaces. This resulted in *el Plan de Fortalecimiento Organizativo*, the Plan to Strengthen the Organisation, introduced internally a couple of months later in 2016 and consequently discussed by all the assemblies in Barcelona. The plan contained proposals for organizational innovations concerning internal and external communication as well as transparency and participation.¹⁹

In the context of a unfolding conflict between the central government in Madrid and the Catalan autonomous government in the autumn of 2017, there was another vote on the pact with PSC. This time the members of Barcelona en Comú voted against working with PSC – due to their support for the implementation of article 155 and the taking into police custody of Catalan political and civic leaders (reflecting the national party line of PSOE in Madrid).²⁰

Creating a new institutionalility – how do they behave?

The debates around the vote on the pact with PSC shows some of the challenges and accomplishments of Barcelona en Comú's attempt to create a movement-party. At stake are issues of communication, information and trust. All of these combine with the broader question of the time needed for democratic decision-making: at what pace are decisions made inside and outside the institution, how much time is required for different kinds of decisions and how much time is actually granted? Even though there is a lot of debate, assembly members have the impression that there not enough time and space is allowed. This is also because of the political unrest and crisis in Spain. As a result of the many elections taking place in the past years, activists of Barcelona en Comú were kept busy with campaigning which was treated as an immediate problem and meant that other topics were less prioritized. When the time comes to decide on seemingly less urgent topics but ones that relate to much of the daily work, there is not enough time to think and discuss. This has led to the impression that 'the organization runs after reality'.²¹ This couples with an organizational base made up of multifarious ideologies and people with diverse background, which can create incoherence and lack of consistence in political arguments. Many members therefore feel that there is never enough time to understand, reflect and consolidate their political actions and organization.

The new institutionalility of Barcelona en Comú requires long time slots for debate and consensus-based decision-making to elaborate opinions, political analysis and ultimately political representation. It has to bring different organizational levels together. One of the biggest challenges are the clashes of different organizational logics, in particular the specific conditions of time/speed within vertical structures of the institution compared to the horizontal structures of the movement. Political actors sitting in office often describe how fast decisions are made to implement certain changes and the slow and lengthy processes within vertical, institutional structures that delay actual implementation. This is in glaring contrast to street-level, militant, horizontal structures where it takes a long while to deliberate on issues, problems and strategies but then are realized very fast. Further, as Barcelona en Comú forms a minority government, they have to negotiate every plan with fellow parties in the city hall. This also slows down their plans for transformation.

This shows that co-responsibility and co-production of politics requires a restructuring of the city hall as a whole. It entails an everyday fight for a better integration of deliberative spaces

inside and outside the institution. It also depends highly on the willingness and motivation of political actors holding key positions. The statement of Gala Pin above is one example. It shows that dialogue between the different levels of governance is indispensable, as having a vote is only one way of checking with the base. As long as the roles of the different entities – in this case municipal group and assembly and the relation between them – remain unclear and in a state of renegotiation, it is crucial to constantly reinforce encounter and dialogue. Ultimately, the question is, of course, who actually brings up the topics that are debated, which was critiqued as not sufficiently transparent by some assembly members, as well as who has the influence on decisions made by the government. In the new institutions they are trying to build, this would be done equally by both the assembly and municipal group.

The assembly as an organizational entity has tried to establish an identity which facilitates an effective relation with the municipal group. Assembly participants wish to go beyond applauding the decisions of the government. Municipal group representatives meanwhile need critical support and reliable information on what is happening in the neighbourhoods. The hope on both sides is that the political organization matures with time which would mean to grow some distance between the assembly and municipal group in order to effectively critique and mirror their governmental work.

Militants, representatives and citizens have to develop capacities such as resilience, patience and assertiveness in order to maintain the struggle for political participation. At the moment, the political dialogue between institution and movement is limited to specific time and spatial frames that open and close. With the support and nurturing of independent self-organization of the diverse social groups inhabiting the city, the long-term goal is a state of constant dialogue between institution and citizens. This puts the institution in motion and renders democratic action visible through constant struggle and handcrafted politics. The latter signifies a political process which is handmade as it is shot through with encounter, dialogue and deliberation crafted through the actions and the participation of each participant. Even though the formal set up of a democratic decision-making process is important as a framework which guarantees certain aspects such as respect, time slots etc., it is much more dependent on the capacities of its participants, such as the ability to take criticism, to think jointly and have imaginative power.

Seeds of a common future

Many of the people I met during my ethnographic research within Barcelona en Comú in 2016 told me that they do not really believe in representative democracy and that it was overrated as a political system. It is therefore stunning that these same people engaged everyday in activism in order to tackle the challenges of everyday life and living in a plural society. Their actions are first and foremost informed by pragmatism and the necessity to act. In an unequal city these capacities are important in order to initiate transformation and translate it into concrete changes and the enactment of local democracy. The lack of a collective culture has to be tackled by relearning how to think together, how to re-balance power and build collective knowledges, horizons and futures in order to create imaginaries of the good life and come up with ways to achieve them.

Many political actors of Barcelona en Comú described their experience of rigid institutional structures when they entered the city hall – inflexible and unmoveable to a degree which they

did not expect. They imagined that the movement would encompass the institution, but instead the institution nearly swallowed the movement. The separation between institutions and citizens, which can be observed in its forms of communication and distribution of information, has to be constantly and actively addressed. Moving to public squares provided for a better encounter with citizens. Now, with the square occupations over, the assemblies continue to exist in the social centres throughout Barcelona. In the assembly every participant has an equal voice. Direct encounter and dialogue between representatives and citizens is integral and key to building trust and proximity between citizens and their public institution. Democracy is not only a political system but a socio-cultural one as well. It entails an activation of citizens, accessible political representatives and the management of contradictions of opinions, ways of life and ideologies. This presents challenges as well as opportunities for the political organization. A pragmatic approach to a politics of the everyday and the present certainly makes it difficult for a movement-party within a system of traditional, hierarchical parties and bureaucratic structures. At the same time it is a factor of innovation, as it introduces an understanding of the political which goes beyond government institutions. Democratic action becomes part of everyday social life which helps create a more democratic culture. However, these seeds for a common future of the good life had only just been planted by Barcelona en Comú and need to be now nurtured and maintained in order to grow and become reality.

Andreea Zelinka is a Masters student of Social and Cultural Anthropology at University of Vienna and Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and a Bachelor student of Arabistics and Islam Studies at University of Vienna. Her academic interests include anthropology of social movements, anthropology of democracy and anthropology of war. She has conducted research on political parties in Austria and Spain. Her Master's thesis is concerned with forms of democratization within the political organization Barcelona en Comú and in the neighbourhoods of Barcelona. Furthermore, she is active in several social movements concerned with human rights, asylum rights and food sovereignty.

Endnotes

1. In 2016 I conducted an ethnographic field research within Barcelona en Comú for half a year. Next to participant observation in the assembly of Ciutat Vella and other participatory spaces, I interviewed 16 members of the assembly. Most of them mentioned in the interviews that Barcelona en Comú was forming a minority government which poses specific challenges, as they constantly have to negotiate with other parties and are thus not able to easily implement their political program.

Further readings on Barcelona en Comú: Bertie Russell/Oscar Reyes: *Eight Lessons from Barcelona en Comú on How to Take Back Control*, <http://www.urbantransformations.ox.ac.uk/blog/2017/eight-lessons-from-barcelona-en-comu-on-how-to-take-back-control/> ; Ismael Blanco/Yunails Salazar/Iolanda Bianchi: *Transforming Barcelona's Urban Model? Limits and potentials for radical change under a radical left government*.

<https://cura.our.dmu.ac.uk/2017/03/15/transforming-barcelonas-urban-model-limits-and-potentials-for-radical-change-under-a-radical-left-government/> ; Pablo Aragón, Yana Volkovich, David Laniado, Andreas Kaltenbrunner: *When a Movement Becomes a Party: The 2015 Barcelona City Council Election*, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1507.08599.pdf>
2. Feixa et al. Ibid. <http://nuso.org/articulo/del-altermundialismo-a-la-indignacion-cronotopos-del-activismo-politico-juvenil-en-barcelona/>
3. Ibid.; Fominaya, Cristina Flesher (2015) 'Debunking Spontaneity: Spain's 15-M/Indignados as Autonomous Movement', *Social Movement Studies*, 14/2, p. 145.
4. Ibid.
5. Harvey, David (2013) *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, London/New York: Verso, p. 138.
6. Appadurai, Arjun (2013) *The Future as Cultural Fact. Essays on the Global Condition*, London/New York: Verso.
7. EFE (21.2.2017) ,Barcelona en Comú abre un concurso para financiar proyectos con los excedentes salariales', *La Vanguardia*, Available at: <http://www.lavanguardia.com/local/barcelona/20170221/42201123031/filadora-concurso-proyectos-excedente-sueldos-barcelona-en-comu.html> (retrieved 21 February 2017); Ortiz, Laia (27.12.2016, Parlem de prioritats: uns pressupostos socials', *El Diari*, available at: http://www.eldiario.es/catalunyaplural/opinions/Parlem-prioritats-uns-pessupostos-socials_6_593600649.html (retrieved 27 December 2016); Cid i Ricard Gomà, David (10.3.2016), Cinc canvis reals que ha fet Barcelona en Comú en vuit mesos', <http://www.elcritic.cat/blogs/sentitcritic/2016/03/10/cinc-canvis-reals-que-ha-fet-barcelona-en-comu-en-vuit-mesos/> (retrieved 10 March 2016).
8. Karyotis, Theodors (2017) 'The Right to the City in an Age of Austerity', *Roar*, available at: <https://roarmag.org/magazine/right-city-age-austerity/> (retrieved 1 November 2017).
9. Greenberg, Jessica (2014) *After the Revolution. Youth, Democracy, and the Politics of Disappointment in Serbia*, Stanford University Press, p. 3.
10. Ibid., p. 33.
11. Ibid., p. 25f, 35.
12. ICV is the Catalan Green Party which exists since 1987. See also <http://www.iniciativa.cat/ca>
13. Interview with member of assembly of Ciutat Vella (Barcelona, 9.6.16).
14. Interview with member of assembly of Ciutat Vella (Barcelona, 17.3.16).
15. For reason of protection, all informants are kept anonymous.
16. Interview with member of assembly of Ciutat Vella (Barcelona, 9.6.16).
17. Ibid.
18. Drawing from my field notes and interviews, the municipal government was formed for one term before Barcelona en Comú by (Convergència i Unió) CiU, a liberal, conservative political party which does not exist in this form anymore. Before that PSC (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya) governed the city for over two decades.
19. 19 In order to know whether this plan proved to bring about changes and enhancing internal democracy, it would be necessary for the me to 'return to the field' now, one year later.
20. 20 Guerrero, David (12.11.2017) 'Barcelona en Comú rompe el pacto con el PSC en Barcelona por el apoyo al artículo 155', *La Vanguardia*, available at: <http://www.lavanguardia.com/local/barcelona/20171112/432834000520/colau-rompe-pacto-gobierno-psc-barcelona.html> (retrieved 12 November 2017).
21. 21 Interview with member of assembly of Ciutat Vella (Barcelona, 20.7.16).