



COMMONING THE PUBLIC

TRANSLATING EUROPEAN NEW
MUNICIPALISM TO THE UK CONTEXT

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to the UK Context

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Executive Summary

Municipal government in the UK has been in crisis for decades. Heavily constricted powers and ever-shrinking budgets have dramatically reduced local government's room for manoeuvre while impacting badly on the recipients of the public services they supply. One bright counter-tendency to that trend has been the emergence of the community wealth building tradition.

In this report we propose there are also lessons to be drawn from the new municipalist movements which swept across many areas of Europe in the second half of the 2010s.

While many of the practices of the European model of new municipalism aren't directly translatable to the UK context, we have identified a key set of policies and practices, variously titled public-civic or public-common partnerships which are not only eminently translatable to the UK situation, but which are also uniquely

suiting to an emerging situation in which a newly interventionist state seems likely to launch a massive new round of public-private partnerships. In this report we examine two key instances of public-civic action, the Patrimonio Ciudadano (Citizens Assets) programme in Barcelona and the commoning of public assets in

Naples. We explain the lessons these experiences hold for UK municipal authorities, community activists and social movement actors. We also discuss how these models can be adapted for the UK context and provide a valuable new direction in the fight for democratic renewal and a just transition.

Our key recommendations are:

- ☀ We show that participative, democratic models for the community management of assets and public services can not only be effective and efficient but can also be beneficial for democracy more widely. Their operation builds constituencies for their own support and extension while developing the democratic capacities of those who participate in them.
- ☀ Public-common and public-community partnerships can be constructed to reinforce public services rather than detract from them, particularly if business models which extract value from communities are simultaneously disadvantaged.
- ☀ Legislative and legal activism to establish community usage rights over assets which remain under public ownership should be explored in the UK as a means for future-proofing both public ownership and common governance.
- ☀ Social value models which assign economic value to social and solidarity economy activities are effective ways of legitimising those activities to cash strapped local authorities but they should be supplemented by forms of measure which emerge from and speak to the values of the communities involved.
- ☀ When resolving the organisational logics of the public sector with the more participative democratic practices of communities and social movements it's important that the latter isn't forced to simply conform with the former. The genuine co-production policy is both possible and valuable.



“...the post-2008 conjuncture to which both Platform Municipalism and Community Wealth Building were a response, has come to an end. A new political, economic, and regulatory regime is arising that the genuinely participatory and democratic management of assets and public services is well-positioned to influence.”





Introduction

In 2015 a New Municipalist movement based on bottom-up Citizen's Platforms swept across Spain gaining control of six of the seven largest cities in the country.

In 2020 France experienced a similar wave with Municipalist candidacies holding the mayoralties of Grenoble and Saillans and winning for the first time in Nantes, Marseille, Lyon, and Rennes. These examples of what Matt Thompson has called Platform Municipalism embody a distinctive and innovative approach to politics which introduces practices drawn from more participative democratic traditions into the sphere of top-down representative democracy.[i] So far, these experiences have had only a limited impact in the UK, where the municipalist scene has been more strongly influenced by a trans-Atlantic exchange around the theory and practice of Community Wealth Building.[ii]

The municipalist waves in Spain and France have both now ebbed, with the flagship regime of Barcelona en Comu and its mayor Ada Collau losing the elections held in 2023. Although a new municipalist wave has risen in the Balkans where the citizen's platform Mozemo gained control of the city council along with the Mayoralty of Zagreb in 2021, it might be argued that the ultimate fate of municipalism in Spain and France limits the lessons that can be drawn from those experiences. Indeed, some

have pointed to the difficulties in following the Platform Municipalist model in the UK given the different structure of UK politics and so the different political opportunities those structures afford.[iii] In this report we don't directly address the limitations of Platform Municipalism or the potential for its introduction into the UK. Instead, we examine some of the policies and programs introduced by the municipalist movement which encapsulate its wider attempt to resolve participative democratic forms with the structures of representative democracy. These are variously called Public-Civic and Public-Common Partnerships. We see these as a potential supplement to existing Community Wealth Building practices in the UK and a useful point of reference for civic and social movement actors interested in practices such as community asset transfers and commoning.

The time is right for such an examination, not only because it fits with the general direction of travel in UK municipalism but also because, we would argue, the post-2008 conjuncture to which both Platform Municipalism and Community Wealth Building were a response, has come to an end. A new political, economic, and regulatory regime is arising that the genuinely participatory and democratic management of assets and public services is well-positioned to influence. To make this argument more fully we will need to present our analysis of the present conjuncture.





The De-risking State

With the advent of what has come to be called Bidenomics in the US an important change of direction in macro-economic policy appears to be emerging.

If, as currently seems likely, the UK sees a Labour Party government elected in 2024 we can expect the emerging US policy framework to strongly influence British economic policy. This will, in turn, set the terrain on which municipal policy will be framed. It is, therefore, important to understand this change and to develop strategies that can shape its unfolding. This new political, economic and regulatory regime is still in the process of formation; but while its parameters are not yet

fixed, the direction of travel can be grasped if we understand the structural problems provoking it.

The current moment is dominated by two interrelated crises. The first has been called secular stagnation, the long-term slowdown of economic growth which predates the great financial crisis of 2008 but which was made apparent by it and the slow recovery and repeated crises that followed it. While this is a global problem, it's particularly evident in the UK where the broken growth model has been unable to provide rising wages and living standards for a large enough section of the population to maintain stability. Average UK wages are currently around the same level they were in 2008. That's

fifteen years of zero wage growth, a period of wage stagnation not seen since the Napoleonic wars.[iv]

For the other all-encompassing crisis of the current conjuncture we can look to climate change and the other related facets of environmental breakdown. This is a crisis that manifests politically as the problem of green transition, the need to rapidly decarbonise the economy. Since 1990 the dominant intergovernmental responses have been market-based; carbon trading and offsetting. The catastrophic failure of this approach to reduce carbon emissions has finally led to widespread recognition that market coordination is simply unsuited to the huge infrastructural transformation required in a green transition. As Melanie Brusseler explains, for this historic effort, “investment and divestment must be undertaken rapidly, often out of sync with existing capital depreciation and expenditure cycles, and without primary concern for private profitability.”[v]

These dual, overlapping problems set the context in which we should understand the shift in macro-economic policy currently visible in the US and promised in the UK. The signature policies of Bidenomics, such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS act, indicate a return to industrial strategy and active, purposive state planning of the economy. Over the coming years huge volumes of state-led investment will be deployed to guide, supplement, or replace private investment in key strategic economic sectors. Determining the imperatives driving these investments will be one of the key political battle grounds of the coming decade. Currently this may seem remote from municipal policy, but the turn in macro-economic policy will politicise investment decisions at this level as well.

As it stands this wave of public investment will likely take the form of a huge, new round of public-private partnerships (PPPs), in which the public - i.e. the state - de-risks private investment in areas it wants to influence. De-risking can take a variety of forms from tax credits, to direct subsidies, to government contracts guaranteeing set incomes for periods of up to thirty years, but all models of public-private partnerships follow the same familiar principle, the risks of investments are socialised, but the rewards are privatised.[vi]

Indeed, in the UK while the Labour Party’s proposed Green Prosperity Plan, a green investment programme of £280 billion spread over ten years, indicates a move away from a purely market led approach to decarbonising the economy in the UK, all the indications point to Labour’s Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves favouring public-private partnerships to a far larger extent than the designers of the IRA.[vii] In November 2023, for instance, Reeves convened a national infrastructure council to advise her on collaboration between public and private investment. The council includes representatives from Lloyds Bank, HSBC, Santander UK, and the US based asset management giant BlackRock.[viii]

If this model comes to dominate the international effort to decarbonise the economy, it will lead to a step change increase in both inequality and the centralisation of ownership of the core infrastructure upon which our societies depend. Indeed, As Brett Christophers has indicated there’s a very real risk of a small number of large asset management firms gaining monopolistic control over key renewable energy infrastructure.[ix]



Why We Need Democracy and Participation

A technocratically managed green transition involving huge transfers of public wealth into the bank accounts of the largest and most predatory corporations in the world isn't just likely to fail on its own terms but is also a disastrous prospect for democracy.

Years of democratic inefficacy, in which most people are simply unable to vote for the policies they say they want, has caused, particularly since the 2008 financial crisis, repeated political shocks and

ruptures, from Brexit to the election of Donald Trump to the rise of the Far-Right around Europe. If the green transition is planned and delivered in a high-handed technocratic manner, then it's likely to engender resistance. This much is evident from the rise of the Gilets Jaune in France, campaigns against Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) regulations in London or the spread of conspiracy theories about 15-minute cities across the rest of the UK.[x] Such movements, no matter how outwardly bizarre, contain a grain of truth. A technocratic, top-down transition which doesn't address the huge wealth inequalities built up over the last thirty

years, will ultimately reflect and reinforce existing imbalances of power.[xi] Without a process of re-democratisation the costs of a green transition will be dumped on those unable to avoid them and least able to bear them. For this reason any decarbonisation of the economy must be accompanied by its democratisation.

Within this context experiments in public-civic and public-common partnerships must be explored as alternatives to public-private partnerships. These models for the democratic management of assets and public services are not only well adapted to the newly emerging de-risking state but they also help build democratic constituencies through their very operation.

At the same time we must take seriously the critiques and objections raised against such an approach. There is a legitimate fear that community asset transfers and community involvement in the management of public services can act as a Trojan Horse for privatisation and the further entrenchment of market mechanisms in public provision. Such worries are fuelled by the keen interest of a section of the Conservative Party in what they call Community Powered Conservatism, in which society is expected to fill the gaps left by a state shrunk by austerity.[xii] More substantial justifications for a degree of caution can be found in analyses of the sociologist Erik Swyngedouw, who argues that such social innovations fitting into what he calls “governance-beyond-the-state” can be a Janus-faced phenomenon, facilitating new forms of participation and democracy on the one hand but also potentially entrenching existing social hierarchies, exempting decision making from democratic oversight, and consolidating “the ‘market’ as the principal institutional form.”

...experiments in public -civic and public-common partnerships must be explored as alternatives...

While the state, legitimised by the structures of representative democracy, can claim a bounded universality for its authority, the same is not necessarily true of community-ownership where the legitimacy for control of an asset must be constructed. Often that legitimacy is drawn from the state which “plays a pivotal and often autocratic role in transferring competencies”, imposing structures and forms of measurement upon communities while delimiting the range of participants in reflection of existing hierarchies.[xiii] Swyngedouw’s subtle critique also argues that the modes of accountability imposed through governance-beyond-the-state can instil certain modes of thinking and rationality based on purely economic calculation and the practices of accountancy in which the units of measure and practices of measurement allow control at a distance over the social and solidarity economy in ways that evade democratic contestation.

Swyngedouw’s critique provides us with some criteria through which to assess our case studies. Do these examples of the devolving of public assets and services to community control undermine or enhance public provision? Do they increase democratic participation and oversight or restrict it? Are their modes of legitimation and accountability imposed on communities or do they also respond to the values upon which those communities already operate?



Case Studies

There are a range of public-common and public-civic partnership examples across Europe that we could have chosen. There are, for example, a range of interesting public-civic partnership schemes across the Balkans. After examining these alternatives we decided on examples drawn from two cities. The first draws on experiences in Barcelona during the innovative Barcelona en Comu administration. The second case study drawing on experiences in Naples provides a nice counterpoint by examining a quite different approach to addressing a similar situation. The municipalist movement in Italy has been more localised than the waves which swept Spain and France and pursued a different strategy in response.



CASE STUDY 1: BARCELONA

In the Summer of 2009 fifteen people met in La Bordeta, a neighbourhood of Barcelona, to launch a campaign called TicTac Can Batlló. Can Batlló is a 13,000 square metre, former industrial complex earmarked since 1976 for the provision of public facilities and a 4.7-hectare park but by 2009 little progress towards this end had been made. In response, the campaign set their own two-year timeline.

The TicTac in the campaign name represents the ticking of a clock, a countdown to the 11 June 2011 deadline. If the transformation of the site remained blocked on that date then the campaigners pledged to squat the site and socialise it directly. This countdown and pledging campaign allowed the movement to snowball, applying increasing pressure on the city council and the site's owners as the time ticked away. The words TicTac Can Batlló accompanied by the image of a clock spread throughout the area on posters and paintings. Large, colourful parades and demonstrations were organised.

As the deadline approached, the initial 15 had grown to 2,500 local people, all pledging to occupy the site. The campaign also proved, as they have a tendency to do, both pedagogical and radicalising, with its demands shifting from simple public provision to self-managed community control. To the surprise of many as time ran short, the newly elected centre right government cracked and agreed that the Block 11 building of the Can Batlló site should be handed over to the community.

The first project created on the site was a public library self-managed by the community. Soon more space within the complex was quietly claimed as the range of projects diversified. Today there are 30 different initiatives at Can Batlló, employing around 400 people with a user base of over 50,000. The services and activities range from a bar, social centre, and auditorium to a restaurant, brewery, community garden and food bank, through sports facilities, a climbing wall, artistic spaces, a publishing house and a print shop. It also houses the Cooperative incubator Coòpolis, and work spaces for carpentry, construction, and vehicle repair. Close by and feeding into Can Batlló is a now famous cohousing cooperative La Borda along with a cooperative school for neighbourhood children.



These projects are linked together by a coordination committee and a weekly general assembly open to anyone from the neighbourhood.

The initial agreement between the assembly and the municipal council was undefined and non-legally binding. This left the gains of the campaign vulnerable without the future proofing that institutionalization could offer. This vulnerability was also shared with a network of self-managed socio-cultural centres run in council owned buildings which were leased without clear criteria for their continuation. In 2016 they formed the basis for the Xarxa d'Espais Comunitaris (Network of Community Spaces) which demanded legal recognition from the City Council for running self-managed public services. Following the municipal elections in 2015 the new municipalist Barcelona en Comú administration commissioned the think-tank La Hidra Cooperativa to develop a structure through which public assets could be self-managed by organised communities while providing a measure of institutional protection along with the resources that the provision of public services requires. This resulted in 2017 in the city council adopting the program of Patrimonio Ciudadano (Citizens Assets) for Community Use and Management.[xiv]

The Patrimonio Ciudadano (Citizens Assets) program, developed in close collaboration with the Xarxa d'Espais Comunitaris and other social solidarity projects, established a set of procedures and institutions to enable and facilitate the community self-management of public assets. The first is a citizen's asset board to allocate premises or land to community projects, although these decisions are still subject to political approval. A publicly available database of public assets is maintained to facilitate community access and a technical office of civil servants was established to provide support and training to potential public-civic partnership projects. This support has been crucial to overcoming the critique made of the UK's Big Society program that already well-resourced communities could gain proportionally more resources than poorer communities owing to imbalances in the time and capacity needed to access them.

Finally, L'Hidra established a mode of evaluation called Community Balance. Barcelona already had an established social return metric, a calculation in which the savings made by the state through a project's operations are given a monetary value.

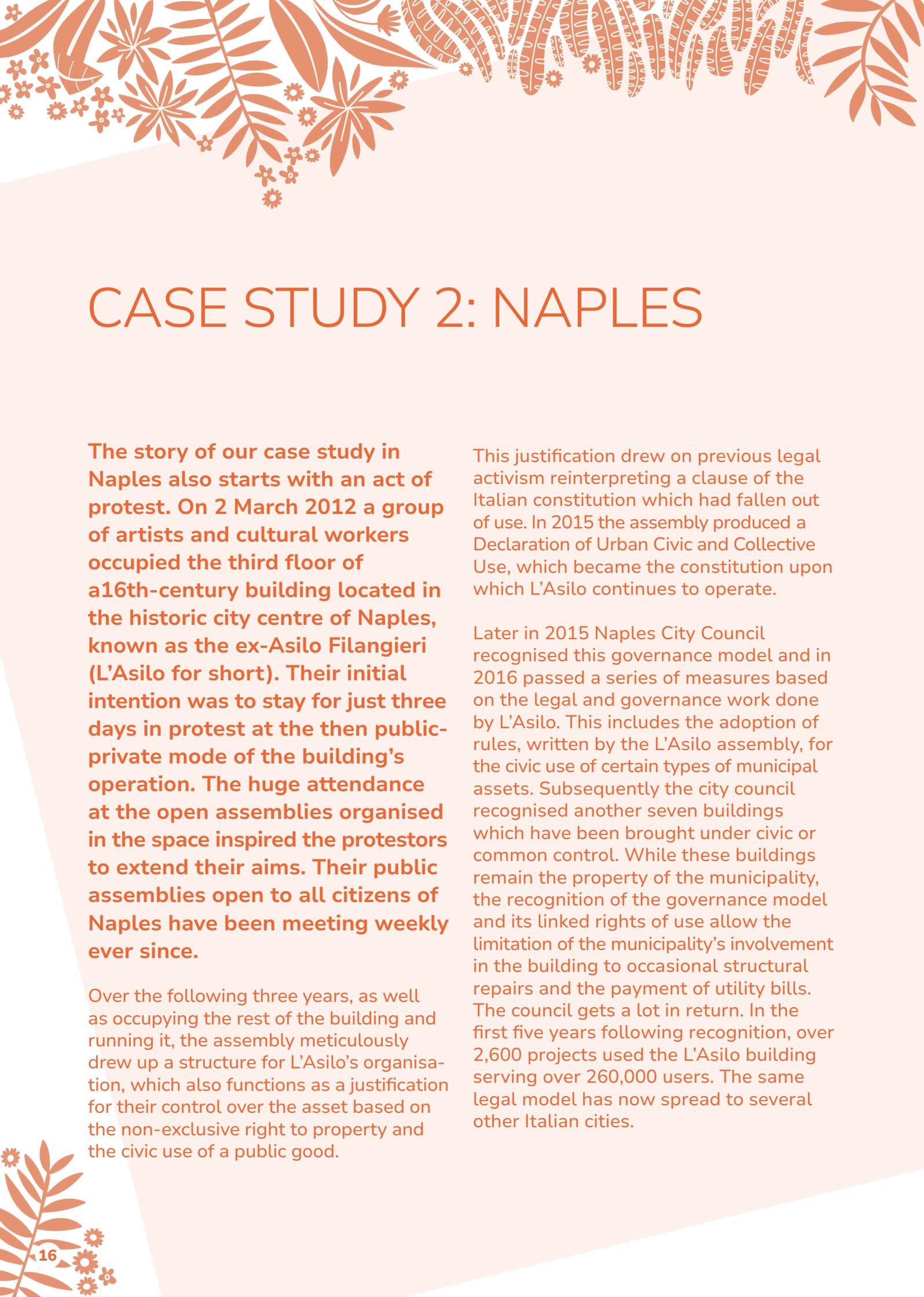


The Community Balance metric is different. It is used to “assess territorial roots, social co-responsibility, democratic management, citizen participation, the orientation towards human needs, the commitment to the community and the social return.” [xv] This not only establishes legitimacy for asset transfers, and ensures the program can’t be used as a conduit for privatised outsourcing, it also acts as a form of self-evaluation, helping projects become more embedded in their communities and more universally accessible.

The Patrimonio Ciudadano program “separates the underpinning ownership of property or infrastructure, which continues to be public property, from its common use and management”, but aims to ensure a “community’s ability to govern itself on the basis of its own rules” as long as those rules meet the Community Balance criteria.

In March 2019 the Barcelona city council granted the Can Batlló assembly a 50-year right to use for the whole ex-factory complex. “The agreement stipulates that the City Council is responsible for the costs of utilities and the security of the public space, as well as for the major refurbishment work still to be carried out”.

This is made possible based on an economic calculation of the savings to the municipality produced by the self-managed provision of services on the site. It was estimated that “the social return of Can Batlló is 1.4 million euros per year for the city. In other words, for every euro that public institutions contribute, Can Batlló generates four.” [xvi]



CASE STUDY 2: NAPLES

The story of our case study in Naples also starts with an act of protest. On 2 March 2012 a group of artists and cultural workers occupied the third floor of a 16th-century building located in the historic city centre of Naples, known as the ex-Asilo Filangieri (L'Asilo for short). Their initial intention was to stay for just three days in protest at the then public-private mode of the building's operation. The huge attendance at the open assemblies organised in the space inspired the protestors to extend their aims. Their public assemblies open to all citizens of Naples have been meeting weekly ever since.

Over the following three years, as well as occupying the rest of the building and running it, the assembly meticulously drew up a structure for L'Asilo's organisation, which also functions as a justification for their control over the asset based on the non-exclusive right to property and the civic use of a public good.

This justification drew on previous legal activism reinterpreting a clause of the Italian constitution which had fallen out of use. In 2015 the assembly produced a Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use, which became the constitution upon which L'Asilo continues to operate.

Later in 2015 Naples City Council recognised this governance model and in 2016 passed a series of measures based on the legal and governance work done by L'Asilo. This includes the adoption of rules, written by the L'Asilo assembly, for the civic use of certain types of municipal assets. Subsequently the city council recognised another seven buildings which have been brought under civic or common control. While these buildings remain the property of the municipality, the recognition of the governance model and its linked rights of use allow the limitation of the municipality's involvement in the building to occasional structural repairs and the payment of utility bills. The council gets a lot in return. In the first five years following recognition, over 2,600 projects used the L'Asilo building serving over 260,000 users. The same legal model has now spread to several other Italian cities.



The occupiers of L'Asilo were lucky to have a receptive mayor in Luigi de Magistris in power from June 2011 to September 2021. The surprise election of this political outsider followed hard on the heels of another electoral shock. Between 2010 and 2011 the Italian Forum of Water Movements, led by Tommaso Fattori, had campaigned hard against water privatisation under the slogan 'Water as a Common', they collected the required signatures to spark a citizen's initiative referendum which was overwhelmingly passed in June 2011. The campaign introduced the concept of the commons to the Italian public, influencing De Magistris's political campaign and becoming incorporated into his platform. The activists of L'Asilo, however, decided against directly joining his administration. Instead they acted in an autonomous but collaborative manner drawing up their own principles for their building's usage before presenting them to the mayor based on their own merits.



An Innovative Methodology

Collective knowledge production is key to the efficacy of commoning as an organisational method. Attempts to study the commons are often hampered by the failure of the chosen research methods to replicate this collectivity. To address this problem, following extensive secondary research, we invented a gameplay research method based on the collective recreation of a project's history.

Our methodology (reproduced in more detail in an appendix) functioned, in effect, like a group interview in which the participants collectively determined the topics, problems and questions around which the interview revolved. During our research in Barcelona we ran

a session of the research game with representatives of the key parties in the development of the Patrimonio Ciudadano (Citizens Assets) program, including a member of the Xarxa d'Espais Comunitaris (Network of Community Spaces), a member of the L'Hidra think tank, and a technician (civil servant) on Patrimonio Ciudadano program. In this way the research game staged an encounter between the different parties in the public common relationship, allowing each party to state their understanding of the project in conversation with each other. Following the game, we collected further accounts through semi-structured interviews conducted online. Due to limited resources we were unable to gain such excellent access in Naples, where we relied instead on semi-structured interviews and group discussions with activists and participants in the ex-Asilo Filangieri collective.



Data Analysis

During our analysis of the data we identified three core themes that emerged strongly in the game play, group discussions, and interviews with participants. These are, 'The concept of the commons', 'reconciling democratic cultures', and 'the problem of legitimacy'.

In this section we elaborate on those themes in the context of our discussions with participants in Barcelona and Naples, saving our transposition of those themes to a UK social municipalist context for the following chapter.

THE CONCEPT OF THE COMMONS

In both Barcelona and Naples, the concept of the commons has been introduced into popular discourse relatively recently and that introduction has been key to opening up space for a new approach to public assets and services. It is useful for us to understand how the concept was introduced, how it has been defined and the uses to which it has been put.

In Barcelona the concept of the commons has been an important mechanism for reframing how citizens understand community. Our research game participants discussed how the idea was used as an intervention into the dominant discourse that constructs communities as service-providing entities which occupy a shared territory with the voluntary and non-profit sector. The experience of the

technician was that any discussion that took 'the public' as its starting point would inevitably invite this 'service mindset'. In contrast, they wanted to normalise a model of community as something that produces for itself while also reproducing itself through its own collective endeavours. The participant from the XES network told us about earlier attempts to talk in terms of 'popular power', saying this had failed to produce the shift in thinking that was required.

The move towards foregrounding the commons in these discussions was not, however without complication. To begin with they were faced with the problem of how to establish a historically situated practice in a city that has no recent (i.e. post 17th century) tradition of it. This,

for one participant meant 'narrating [the commons] in a different way to give them the power that they had in Barcelona's history'. A second challenge was that although Barcelona, like many western European cities, has a handful of actually existing commons, these lay outside the scope of the project which instead was centred on 'commoning the public'. In other words, an approach to commoning that went beyond legalistic notions of land ownership, and towards innovations in governance, reproduction, and use.

Our Naples participants also spoke of the centrality of the commons to their project but also discussed how the ground had already been laid for their use of the concept. In part, this was due to the success of the 2011 struggle to have water legally constituted as a commons, but it was also due to the preceding 2008 government Rodotà Commission which produced the first technical-legislative definition of the commons as,

“...goods whose utility is functional to the pursuit of fundamental rights and free development of the person. Commons must be upheld and safeguarded by law also for the benefit of future generations... their collective fruition must be safeguarded, within the limits of and according to the process of law. When the holders are public juridical persons the common properties are managed by public entities and are considered out of commerce... The commons legal regime must be coordinated with that of civic uses.” [xvii]

Through this, the concept of the commons was already well-embedded in the popular imagination and broadly understood. Indeed, the centrality of the legal sphere as a key terrain of struggle along with the involvement of juridicalists in Neapolitan radical municipalism meant that relatively arcane or obscure legal ideas and mechanisms were made navigable to the population at large. One participant, a law scholar herself, also noted how the Italian constitution laid some important groundwork for the commons, remarking that it is 'quite solid in terms of public and private property having to respect the social'. On the legal level, she explained, the established link between the commons and rights to civic use meant in Italy the idea of the commons corresponds to community governance over and above collective ownership. As such, there is no tension between the notion of a social space as a commons that is at the same time 'owned' by the civic authority, who have responsibility for its basic upkeep and utilities.

In both Barcelona and Naples defining common use rights for assets was prioritised over ownership. The concept of the commons has been used to designate citizens collectively identifying social problems and designing their own collective, solidaristic response to them outside the logics of public administration and the market. These responses, as the L'Hidra report puts it, involve building "institutions and collective power outside of the State, although not necessarily against it." The attraction of the commons then is that they can build their own political constituencies of support while also developing the democratic competencies and capacities of their participants. In this way, they enrich democratic participation more widely and provide a counter balance to the inequalities and asymmetries of power in contemporary urban development. While these benefits were widely recognised our research also highlighted the unique difficulties that public-common and public-civic partnerships must overcome.

RECONCILING DEMOCRATIC CULTURES

Any public-common or public-community policy requires the resolution of a tension between two distinct organisational logics and cultures. In most countries, but particularly in Spain and Italy, civil society and social movements have open, participative, and directly democratic organising cultures. These are quite different to the more hierarchical logic and practice of representational politics reflected in the outlook and habitus of elected politicians and the civil service. A central aspect of the new European radical municipalism in Barcelona, Naples and elsewhere, has been the creation of common projects between institutions and movements that have historically viewed each other with a level of mutual distrust. This divergence of organisational cultures incorporates language (how those projects are articulated and who the perceived audience is for that articulation), the construction of values (what is or is not a societal good and how it should be measured), temporalities (the different rhythms of working that structure organising processes), and place (such as the physical infrastructure of the spaces of governance and decision making).

Many forms of interaction between the institutions of representative democracy and communities are designed like a one way street. The knowledge contained

in the community is to be packaged in a way the institutions can understand and accepted into the latter only if and when it suits their purposes. Our case studies aimed to overcome that tension but couldn't escape it entirely. Filtering the commons through an institutional logic - 'making it fit with the habitus' of the government and the civil servant technicians - was humorously described by one participant in Barcelona as 'the least sexy thing on earth'. In part because of this, there was a constant push among movement and community activists against what was perceived as institutional drift, with calls to return to 'only struggling in the streets'. Our participant was careful to frame this as a tension that existed both throughout and within those who were participating in the Patrimonio Ciudadano program, rather than as a demand being made by groups connected to the project and resisted by others

The tension between movement and institutional logics could be felt even within the physical spaces of engagement. Our participant from the Xarxa d'Espais Comunitaris (Network of Community Spaces) told a story about an inaugural meeting where delegations from the communities met with government officials to start the process of negotiating a participative means of governance. The

meeting took space in a grand meeting room full of paintings and portraits unlike anything the community participants had previously experienced. As a result a deep sense of alienation rendered people afraid to speak.

This contrasted somewhat with the experience of Naples where the relative power and embeddedness of social movements provided enough leverage to force the state to meet them on their own terrain, with politicians coming to address the mass assemblies. Part of this strength resulted, to the mind of our participants, from the level of state involvement in local governance in Italy which, when looked at alongside other European countries, is relatively low. This has meant that social movements have sat 'more comfortably within common sense'. Even after the political centre right took power in 2018, the leverage held by the social movements, strengthened by the results of previous legal activism, meant that negotiations between the commoners and the state remained productive.

Alongside these differences in spaces where politics took place is the more intractable tension between the different temporalities embedded in the two organisational cultures. There are different speeds and rhythms in the decision making of politicians, civil service technicians, and citizen's involved in deliberative democracy. In Barcelona, our participant from the network of community spaces discussed the challenges in reconciling the culture of working to deadlines among the technicians with the deeper and slower processes of consideration favoured by the commoners. This difference was also reflected in the sense of the permanence of the

communities versus the ephemerality of the politicians whose interest in the development of those communities would ebb and flow with the electoral cycle. As the same participant said, in an imaginary conversation with a politician, 'Four years ago, you were not here. I was here. I am in my community and in my territory and I stay. You are the one who goes away'. Early joint meetings, therefore, were centred on co-developing processes that could function across these differing temporalities in order to produce policy together.

Participants in both cities talked about the contrast in approaches to measuring value between the social movements and the institutions. Our participants in Naples explained how the commons generated value that was not immediately economic but was instead social and cultural and that 'the movements have always been worried about any attempt to give a quantitative representation of this value'. As a consequence the participants in L'Asilo had begun 'a participatory process where they started to elaborate some indexes or tools to measure the civic value of the commons'. In Barcelona, the resolving of different values and modes of valuing was the principal motivation for the creation of the community balance metric. Unlike other forms of social value measurement it was seen as vital that metrics emerge from, and make sense to, the community participants while also being readable by public administrators. This innovation was key to addressing the last theme to emerge from our research, establishing legitimacy for community management of public assets.

THE PROBLEM OF LEGITIMACY

The key question that public-common and public-community partnerships need to deal with is why this community, constructed in this way, has the right to manage this particular asset. Public actors, in particular, fear accusations of nepotism. As one of our participants in Barcelona pithily put it:

In Naples, the development of legitimacy for community ownership of public assets was helped in no small degree by a series of municipal scale crises and scandals which delegitimised claims to impartial universality through representative democracy. These scandals included the proposed privatisation of water

“The private sector has the legitimacy of efficiency, the public sector has the legitimacy of universality [...] [whereas] these people are [seen as] receiving this because they are “friends” of somebody [...] [this] is not something we’ve been able to overcome.”

Indeed, one of the designers of the Patrimonio Ciudadano program complained that fear of accusations of nepotism led to the politicians involved in the program being reluctant to celebrate and promote it. The solution, our participant continued, was to find ways of empowering the politicians to be bold.

services but also a waste management crisis which was central to the election of Luigi de Magistris as a sympathetic mayor.

Alternatives to the usual forms of civic management gained a good degree of legitimacy because the perceived urgency of the situation made the population open to experimentation as a matter of

necessity. In both cities it was also clear that the ‘corruption’ associated with forms of public-private partnerships and the disbursement of public contracts to private actors had undermined faith in public actors and in claims to efficiency made by the private sector. Indeed, suspicions about nepotism in public-community partnerships were partly a result of degraded public attitudes to the public sphere created by the failures of public-private partnerships.

The production of legitimacy is a complicated process that partly lies outside legal or institutional conceptions of ownership or rights. The technician from Barcelona talked perceptively about ‘the location of ownership’ in terms of a collective sense of ownership and responsibility beyond that conferred by legal documentation. For him, the urban commons are a manifestation of ‘a will’ and this will (along with the sense of ownership) should lie with the people while being reflected and put into practice by the institutions. This is a challenge to more paternalistic models which see the public (and the state) as the location of popular will, while the common (and the people) is the body that enacts that will. Rather than gaining proxy legitimacy through permissions from the state, the commons must produce its own legitimacy by proving the efficiency of its management of resources. The commons, after all, has access to far richer information than that gathered by public metrics. This information allows common governance to produce far better and more nuanced decisions than can be made through the reduction of all information to a single measurement of price. Universality of access to this common decision making process then becomes a secondary concern.

Public-common and public-community partnerships can act as a means of ‘future-proofing’ for both sides in the relationship. Providing a measure of legal and institutional protection by ensuring that civic resources brought under community governance (and/or ownership) are not reopened to exploitation by private capital. Our participants in Barcelona saw the key to future-proofing in negotiating an agreement which guaranteed social impact and community participation but kept out the large non-profit or for profit firms who wanted a contract from the government. Again, the community balance index plays an important role here in rendering what one of our participants saw as a fairly simple differentiation between the private and the common (‘you extract benefit or you don’t’), in terms palatable to state institutions that can act as a stable point of reference for future negotiations.

The case of Can Batlló shows what a mobilised community can achieve when it acts in a committed and strategic manner, but it also illustrates several tensions that campaigns for community ownership face when they are successful. The first is the need to maintain mobilisation while avoiding the onset of exhaustion. Without an institutional structure that can delimit the amount of participation required for meaningful involvement, participation in a project can overwhelm those involved causing participation to drop off. The second tension lays in quite the reverse direction, there are dangers that come with professionalisation and over-institutionalization. If a project seems to belong to paid activists or professional politicians, then it’s easy to conclude that popular participation is no longer sought

nor required. Community demobilisation, caused either by exhaustion or usurpation, is a serious risk to projects such as Can Batlló, but it is also fatal for any political project that wants a different future for our towns and cities.

Organised and mobilised communities act as a counter balance to those forces that usually determine the direction of development, the large developers and the flows of private capital that fund them. From the point of view of public actors, public-common and public-community partnerships can reduce the public sector's vulnerability to the pressures of private economic power and to the 4-year political-electoral cycle. In this way the public-common model of asset management and service provision can complement and even protect state-managed public services.



Lessons for the UK

When considering the lessons the experiences in Barcelona and Naples hold for the UK there are considerable differences to take into account.

Firstly, despite recent moves towards the devolution of powers, the UK, and England in particular, has an unusually centralised political system with power concentrated in Westminster and London. This state of affairs was partly brought about by attempts to defeat a previous wave of municipalism in the 1980s. This constriction of rights for municipal authorities, particularly in regard to raising revenue, has been exacerbated by 15 years of savage austerity imposed on local government by a central government which now holds the purse strings.

Secondly, the UK economy, and its political system, is far more financialised than those of either Spain or Italy. The outsourcing of public services is much more established and widespread, with contracts primarily held by large for-profit, extractive service providers and large non-profits who follow the governance models and practices of the most rapacious private corporations.

Rather than an argument against experimentation with public-common and public-community partnerships, we think the UK context provides an environment in which they can flourish if they are adapted and carefully constructed. Indeed, our analysis of the emerging conjuncture reinforces this suitability. The huge new wave of proposed public-private partnerships, for instance, will

likely prove highly controversial. Just as the water privatisation and waste disposal scandals in Naples delegitimized claims to universality by the municipal government, the previous round of public-private partnerships, along with the collapse of the large corporations, such as Carillion, who had won those contracts, has undermined the claims of legitimacy through efficiency previously attached to PPPs.[xviii]

This state of affairs is only exacerbated by the current unpopularity of privatised utilities which are widely seen as profiteering and underperforming.[xix] In addition, the emergence of the 'de-risking state', with its return to industrial strategy in which the state will pick sectors and even individual firms to support by de-risking their investments, means public procurement will inevitably be seen as political and politicised decisions.

This is an environment well suited to arguments in favour of public-common and public-community partnerships. Rather than public resources underwriting and derisking private profit and asset ownership, we might argue, the public should give preference to forms of resourcing and de-risking which result in commonly owned assets which are governed directly by the citizens of a territory, and where the surpluses accrued are not extracted but keep circulating in the local economy.

Alongside the kinds of asset transfers and guaranteeing of usage rights seen in Barcelona and Naples the emerging UK de-risking state will also make possible different kinds of public-common partnerships in which organised communities backed and de-risked by the public can construct investment packages from philanthropic investors

and grant makers, types of patient capital which are prepared to be paid back over much longer periods than purely commercial lenders and, most importantly, direct investment by members of the local community in the form of community share issues.[xx]

There are a number of other considerations to take into account when translating the Barcelona and Naples experiences to the UK. The first are around the concept of the commons. The commons and their enclosure have been central to the construction of contemporary Britain, with a history stretching back to the recognition of common usage rights in the 1217 Charter of the Forest signed as an accompaniment to the Magna Carta. Indeed, the British experience has been central to contemporary conceptions of the commons and the political imaginary that goes with them. That history, however, means the commons are usually seen as a residual form of property rather than as something that can be reinvented to address modern problems.

In terms of the legitimacy of community ownership the UK is tied even more tightly than Spain or Italy to financialised forms of measurement. There are, for instance, several nascent forms of social value modelling, The TOMS (Themes, Outcomes, Measurements) Framework or HACT Social Value model for instance, and despite their usefulness there is a strong need for these to be supplemented by something akin to Barcelona's Community Balance, forms of measure which emerge from and speak to the values of the communities involved. This is important because forms of measurement are disciplinary. They tend to shape and sometimes distort the activities they purport to simply measure.

“...the public should give preference to forms of resourcing and de-risking which result in commonly owned assets which are governed directly by the citizens of a territory, and where the surpluses accrued are not extracted but keep circulating in the local economy.”

This can lead projects away from their core activities as they prioritise hitting targets, but this is just one instance of a wider tendency to subordinate community activity beneath the needs of government and the public sector. This can lead to communities disengaging from a democratic politics which seems uninterested in them, weakening, in turn, representative democracy's claims to universality. Britain's history with public-private partnerships has severely undermined the public's faith in democratic politics as a route to addressing their problems. By contrast public-common partnerships are mechanisms through which democracy can be reinforced and extended.

Participation in the democratic governance of assets acts as a training in democracy, increasing people's democratic capacities and their confidence in democracy. Through their operation they build their own active constituencies of support. Both Barcelona and Naples have long histories of active social movements and the autonomous community provision of services. Although the UK also has a strong history of social movements

and community activism, a series of repressive laws has left Britain with one of the least friendly environments for democratic activism and protest in the developed world. While protests such as those at Can Batllo and L'Asilo are still possible they are more difficult in the UK. This suggests we need the kinds of legal activism and construction of usage rights which provides protection and future proofing for the projects in Barcelona and Naples. In this way public-common and public-community partnerships can play a crucial role in the drive for more economic democracy, but this should also be framed within a much wider push for a new democratic settlement for the UK as part of a just transition to a decarbonised economy.



Recommendations

- ☀ We show that participative, democratic models for the community management of assets and public services can not only be effective and efficient but can also be beneficial for democracy more widely. Their operation builds constituencies for their own support and extension while developing the democratic capacities of those who participate in them.
- ☀ Public-common and public-community partnerships can be constructed to reinforce public services rather than detract from them, particularly if business models which extract value from communities are simultaneously disadvantaged.
- ☀ Legislative and legal activism to establish community usage rights over assets which remain under public ownership should be explored in the UK as a means for future-proofing both public ownership and common governance.
- ☀ Social value models which assign economic value to social and solidarity economy activities are effective ways of legitimising those activities to cash strapped local authorities but they should be supplemented by forms of measure which emerge from and speak to the values of the communities involved.
- ☀ When resolving the organisational logics of the public sector with the more participative democratic practices of communities and social movements it's important that the latter isn't forced to simply conform with the former. The genuine co-production policy is both possible and valuable.





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Appendix

Game methodology



INTRODUCTION

In this appendix we give a more detailed account of our innovative methodology. This is because we believe it has wide potential applications beyond the particular study underlying this report, constituting a useful tool for the understanding of collective social projects whatever their nature.

We are indebted, in our approach, to a role playing game called Microscope developed by Ben Robbins [i]. In Robbins' game, a group of 3 to 5 players gradually tell a story together - occasionally acting parts of it out - of an epic fictional history usually taking place within a science-fiction or fantasy setting.

The authors of this report had previously adapted this game in a study of the political imaginaries of broadly leftwing social-change focused groups in the UK. To do this we asked them to imagine themselves as historians in the future telling a collective history of the previous 100 years, starting from the present day. In doing this we were able to get an understanding of how these groups imagined the future, how coherent this vision was within individual groups, and how hopeful/hopeless or optimistic/pessimistic they were about being able to change the world in the direction in which they believed it should be changed. Among many useful insights we were able to see, for example, how different the techno-progress-faithful visions of a group in Bristol, concentrated at the time on building the Corbynist labour party were to the 'great awakening' imagined by a Calder Valley Extinction Rebellion group. In conducting this research, though, it also became clear to us how useful the experience of playing this game had been to the groups themselves, who in many cases found themselves navigating and negotiating ideas about social change and the future for the first time with other activists with whom they had been working closely. Additionally, it became clear that the game-format of the discussions had the effect of transforming the participants perception of the consequences (levelling the stakes as it were) of sharing ideas such that those who may not have felt confident in doing so under the conditions of a meeting or standard political discussion felt much more able to be involved.

Following this success we decided to explore further modifications to the game in order to look not just forward to the future but backward to the actually lived histories of social projects. We thought this approach seemed plausible because, while not strictly speaking speculative or fictional, collective memory is subject to similar conflicts - differing recollections, differing analyses, differing emotional responses, different details felt to be of significance - as other forms of collective story-telling.

After a period of experimentation which included 'play-testing' the approach by using it to explore, with our friend Will Barker, the past and future of a project that we had all been involved in in Leeds, we ended up with a set of modifications that we felt would work. Our session in Barcelona was the first time our method was tested in the field. These initial experiments produced a set of rules that we outline in the next section.

RULES

The purpose of this method is to record the creation of a collective, achronologically developing narrative about a commonly experienced social project, process, or movement. It is designed to do this in a way that encourages participation, in particular of more marginalised or lesser-heard voices, through game play.

The method allows for the creation of a narrative that radiates both backwards in a historical direction and forwards in a speculative direction from the present and which takes in both large, historical and social changes and small, personal recollections and imagined encounters (the macroscopic and the microscopic). Although the emergent narrative is a collective one, the approach allows for the co-existence of contested moments. The tensions revealed through these points of contestation are important and will be present in any meaningful engagement with a community group.

Prior to play

Three cards (in portrait-orientation) are placed on a table or play area.

- First, a card on which a year is written indicating the beginning of the history.
- Second – to its right - a card on which the word 'now' (or the date of play) is written.
- Third – furthest on the right - a card on which a year is written indicating furthest point of speculation.

The dates can either be set by the facilitator(s) or be negotiated with players prior to the commencement of play. Between the first card and the Now card is the zone of history and memory. Between the Now card and the last card is the zone of speculation and imagination. The cards will begin next to one another but will be spread further apart as play proceeds.

Players and components

In addition to the players/participants, some degree of active intervention from a facilitator or facilitators is required in order for this approach to function properly as a research method.

The role of the facilitator(s) is to -

1. Explain the rules, remind players of these as necessary, progress the game through its stages
2. Set a start date and end date for the narrative (or facilitate a negotiation with the players about the same)
3. Steer the narrative in the direction of areas of data known in advance to be important or which emerge as important during the course of the game by setting 'themes' in the third and any subsequent rounds.
4. Record/take notes on the process (more on this in the 'Data collection' section below)

The players (a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 6) -

1. Add periods, events, and scenarios to an achronologically emerging timeline
2. Set themes in the second round
3. Contest (if they so desire) the period/event/scenario narratives of the other players

Additionally -

- A large, flat surface (such as a large table) is required
- Periods, events, and scenarios are written on blank postcards and placed on the table (a pack of 100 should be more than sufficient for a single game)
- Three contestation tokens are required for each player. Any counter or small object can be used for this purpose.
- It is recommended that photographic or video evidence is collected by the facilitators in addition to any notes or audio recordings. This is because the placement of the cards is important to any subsequent analysis and even if the cards are collected up after the game with great care to preserve their order, accidents can happen.

The order of the game

A starting player is chosen, after which play proceeds to the left through the following 3 (or more) parts:

1.

A themeless round: In this short round each player in turn plays a period, an event nesting within an existing period, or a scenario nesting within an existing event until the players have taken one turn each. Since events and scenarios must nest, the first player must play a period.

2.

Player-themed round: In this longer round each player has the opportunity to set a theme. Each player plays the first and last turn for their chosen theme. For example, in a game in which there are three players, player one sets the theme and plays a turn, player two plays a turn on the same theme, player three does the same, and player one plays the final turn on that same theme. Following this, player two starts a new theme. The round lasts until each player has begun and ended a theme.

3.

Facilitator-themed round: This round proceeds in the same way as round two except that each theme is chosen by the facilitator(s). For example, in a game of three players, the facilitator will choose three themes with one player providing the first and final turn for each theme respectively. The round lasts until a number of themes matching the number of players has been played.

4.

Optional further facilitator themed rounds: Exactly as described in round 3 for as many times as are desirable.

Playing a turn

Step 1:

[Round 2 only:] If it is the player's turn to do so, a theme is chosen as the first part of the turn.

A **theme** can be anything the player wants it to be. For example, it could be a concept such as 'community', 'space', or 'conflict', it could be a specific place such as a street or building, it could be an event such as a local or national election, or it could be a particular person of relevance to the history. Given that in this version of the game we are dealing, at least in part, with 'real life', players should try to avoid choosing a very specific theme that is unfamiliar to other players. When a theme is chosen, it is written by the player on one half of a portrait-oriented postcard, which is then folded and placed upright on the table.

[Round 3 (and optional subsequent rounds) only:] If it is time for a new theme to be chosen by the facilitator(s), players must wait for this to happen before proceeding.

A theme can be anything the facilitator wants it to be and will depend on which areas of the narrative they hope to explore further (See the examples above). With more specific themes, facilitators should limit themselves to things that have emerged in the narrative in the previous rounds. When a theme is chosen, it is written by the facilitator(s) on one half of a portrait-oriented postcard, which is then folded and placed upright on the table.

Step 1 is skipped in the first round and on any subsequent turns where a theme does not need to be chosen.

Step 2:

The player decides if they want to play a period, an event, or a scenario, which can be played at any point along the time-line. There is no requirement for periods, events, or scenarios to be played in chronological sequence.

A **period** denotes a thing that characterises a passage of time that provides the context for events. For example, a period could be the time for which a particular social movement is operating (perhaps something like ‘the time of Occupy’ or ‘the alter-globalisation period’) or it could be the duration for which a particular political party, or party leader, was in government, or it could describe a process such as an ongoing period of related assemblies or encounters. The player should write a word or phrase that names the period and the year or years to which it corresponds on a portrait-oriented postcard and place it along the timeline at the top of the table. Periods should be ordered according to the starting year in cases where they last more than one year. The duration of a period is allowed to overlap with that of other periods. There can be any number of periods on the table.

An **event** nests within a period. If there are no periods on the table, a player cannot play an event and must play a period instead. An event is a thing that happens within a period. It is usually not something that lasts more than a day (although exceptions could be made for things such as a weekend festival or a three-day siege of a squatted social centre). It is not necessary for the event to relate directly to the period description, as long as it happened within the same time period. In cases where overlapping periods provide alternative nesting places for the event, it is down to the player to decide where to place their event. A phrase or sentence that describes the event should be written on a landscape-oriented postcard and placed underneath its corresponding period. There can be any number of events within any period.

A **scenario** nests within an event. If there are no events on the table, a player cannot play a scenario and must play a period or an event within a period instead. A scenario is a detailed encounter or happening that occurs within an event. For example, if the event is the eviction of a squatted social centre, a scenario within that event might be a conversation from either side of a closed door between a spokesperson for the squat and a bailiff or cop. A phrase or sentence that describes the scenario should be written on a portrait-oriented postcard and placed underneath its corresponding event. There can be any number of scenarios nested within any event.

The player describes their period, event, or scenario to the other players. With the exception of during the first round, they should ensure that they say how it relates to the theme. For periods or events this is straightforward. Scenarios, however, have special rules.

For historical events (i.e. those placed before the 'now' marker), the scenarios are memories, described in detail by the player. For speculative events (i.e. those placed after the 'now' marker), the scenarios are wholly imagined. For imagined scenarios, players can choose either to describe them to the other players or to act them out with other players. When a player declares that they want to act out a scenario, each player chooses a character to play and improvises a scene within the parameters set by the initial player. The initial player should be the last to choose a character. The initial player chooses when to end the acting.

Step 3:

Play then continues to the left, except in circumstances where a contestation token is played by another player.

Contestation tokens provide the means for each player to contest periods, events, or scenarios played by other players. Each player has three contestation tokens and can play them at any time during the game – it does not have to be the contesting player's turn. If a player contests the description or framing of a period, event, or scenario played by another player, they must wait for the relevant postcard to be placed on the table, then put a token on top of it. When the active player has finished their turn, the contesting player can say, using no more than one sentence, the reason why they are contesting. For example, perhaps they believe the active player has got the date of an event wrong and has nested it within the wrong period. The active player must then decide whether to concede the point or whether to hold their ground. If they concede, the card is amended (or replaced) to reflect the new consensus and the token is returned to the contesting player. If they reject the contestation, the token is discarded without being returned to the contesting player and the postcard is unaltered. The decision by the active player on whether to concede or to hold ground is final and cannot be challenged. The contesting player, having lost the argument, is of course still free to play an alternative period/event/scenario during their turn. It is permissible for different versions to co-exist in the shared narrative where consensus cannot be found.

The end of the game

Since the shared narrative has the potential to tend towards infinity in its depth, breadth, and detail, the game ends on the completion of the third round or the completion of a round subsequent to the third if time and energy levels make continuation desirable.

At the end of the game, a complex mesh of periods, events, and scenarios will be laid out on the table-top. It is important that facilitators gather this up carefully and take photographic evidence in order to be able to recreate it to assist the process of analysis. It can also be used to stimulate post-game discussion and reflection with players. However, it is also important to note that this method is a dynamic one rather than one aimed at the production of a finished story. While the cards are useful, the process of the production of the collective narrative as it happens is the most important part.

DATA COLLECTION

The data resulting from this game which we subsequently subjected to analysis was to be found in three sources:

1. Our notes taken at the time,
2. Video recordings of the full session; and
3. The cards themselves (along with a photographic record of how they were arranged on the table).

As previously indicated, the most important aspect of the session is not the cards, but the narrative that the cards helped to frame along with the conversation taking place in the process of the negotiation of that narrative. Both the notes recording our observations at the time and the video recordings of the session were vital in helping us to understand that process. We opted for video recordings rather than simple audio recordings (although we also took audio as a back up) in order that things such as body-language could be used to assist in our understanding of group dynamics and the emotional content of the players' spoken contributions. Additionally, video was a precautionary measure because we were unsure whether we would face challenges at the level of basic comprehension given that some of the participants were communicating in a second language and others with the help of a translator. In this specific regard, the precaution proved largely unnecessary.

The careful collecting up of the cards, along with the photographic evidence of their placement, allowed us to recreate the scene during initial analysis. This was valuable in providing context and in stimulating our memories as facilitators.



ABUNDANCE

Abundance is an organisation that promotes public-common strategies to democratise the economy and realise a just socio-ecological transition for everyone.



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