

Eight years of political change in Barcelona

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A poster of Ada Colau's campaign for Barcelona's municipal election in May 2023.

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The local and regional (autonomous community) elections of May 2023 marked a shift to the right across most of the Spanish state. Barcelona was no exception: the intense mobilization of the richest neighbourhoods and the electoral stagnation of *Barcelona en Comú*, the party with which Ada Colau had governed the city since 2015, made the conservative ex-mayor Xavier Trias the candidate with the most votes, at the head of the pro-independence party *Junts*. Colau lost the office of mayor, which she had held for eight years, and her party backed the socialist Jaume Collboni in mayoral investiture negotiations. Collboni was seen as the lesser evil compared to Trias, who had promised to reverse the legacy of Colau's governments.

The unexpected entrance of housing rights activist Ada Colau as Barcelona mayor in 2015 spelled a political earthquake for the Catalan capital. Colau and her party pushed for extensive urban and social transformations. But they also faced strong resistance from the

political, economic and media elites, as well as the inherent limits of municipal institutions in Spain, and the vagaries of party politics. *Barcelona en Comú*, a newly-created electoral party, managed to consolidate itself after the municipal electoral cycle of 2015, when various grassroots candidacies — left-wing coalitions that united politicians and social movement activists— came to power in major Spanish cities.

This article explains the impact of Colau's time in municipal government (2015-2023) on different aspects of the city's public policies, highlighting the areas where lasting transformations were promoted (including urban planning, housing and feminist policies) and those where the change was less perceptible (such as security). It also situates the Barcelona case in the context of the 2015-2019 wave of municipalism, and analyzes the organizational peculiarities of *Barcelona en Comú*, as well as its ties with the city's social movements. Barcelona is the only major European city where the transformative left has managed to form a city government for two terms since the cycle of popular mobilizations that began in 2011. The analysis of this case illustrates the potential and limits of municipal governance as a space for political transformation, and draws conclusions that may be useful to other municipal groups.

The wave of municipalism 2015-2019

2015 was the year of change for Spanish politics. Podemos, the new party on the transformative left, created the previous year, was experiencing a meteoric rise that deeply worried the traditional forces: the conservative *Partido Popular* party (PP) and the social democratic *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* party (PSOE). Meanwhile in Catalonia, the independence movement was gathering strength, with huge demonstrations calling for a referendum on self-determination. The Spanish establishment quaked before what they called "populism" and "separatism".

After the exceptional result obtained by Podemos in the 2014 European elections, the 2015 municipal and regional elections were its first big electoral challenge. Still in its infancy, and with a centralized structure (most of its leaders lived in Madrid) the party found it difficult to successfully compete with the well-oiled machinery of the traditional parties. For this reason, Pablo Iglesias' party decided to promote or join the 'municipalist' campaigns being formed in several cities with the participation of activists from social movements and members of other left-wing parties. With different set-ups and under different names (*Ahora Madrid*, *Zaragoza en Común*, *Cádiz Sí Se Puede*, *Barcelona en Comú*), these campaigns gained historic results in some of the country's main cities.

The wave of municipalism that swept across the state was reminiscent of the victory of the left in the first local elections after the death of Francisco Franco in 1979, as well as the triumph of the republican candidates in the big cities in 1931, which precipitated the proclamation of the Second Republic. At various times in Spanish history, cities have been at the forefront of progressive political changes. In 2015, this Spanish tradition of municipalism merged with the wave of indignation sweeping across Europe over the financial crisis and austerity policies, a tide of change that had previously brought Syriza to power in Greece.

However, with few exceptions, the period of municipalism was short-lived; most of the left-wing candidates were ousted from power in the 2019 elections, largely due to the change in the political cycle in the Spanish state. Although Podemos had achieved good

results in the 2016 general elections — a close third behind the PSOE — the party with the most votes was the PP. Its leader Mariano Rajoy became president when the PSOE abstained in the vote to form the government. A referendum on independence was held in Catalonia in 2017, led by the regional government, and declared illegal by the Spanish judiciary. The event, which mobilized millions of people, was harshly repressed by the Spanish police. This was followed by the judicial persecution of pro-independence leaders, who were charged with disproportionately grievous crimes and wound up imprisoned or in exile.

Spanish politics experienced a shift to the right in response to the independentist movement. The centre-right Ciudadanos party spread from Catalonia to the rest of the Spanish state, and support for the far-right Vox party grew rapidly. The 2019 regional and municipal elections marked the end of the progressive electoral cycle that began with the 2014 European elections. The PP allied with Vox to govern several regions, while the right regained power in almost all cities governed by municipalist candidates. Among the major cities, only Barcelona and Cádiz held on.

In Madrid, traditionally a conservative city, the progressive government of former judge Manuela Carmena only lasted four years. Selected as a candidate for her ability to appeal to the centre-left electorate, Carmena showed an authoritarian style of leadership from the start within the party that had brought her to power, Ahora Madrid. Clashes between the mayor and her more left-wing councillors were frequent, and the ambitious transformation agenda promoted by Ahora Madrid was tempered by the mayor's views. In the 2019 elections, Ahora Madrid was the most voted-for party, but the PP and Ciudadanos' combined results were enough to oust the left from power. However, it would be unfair to attribute the defeat mainly to Carmena's mistakes. Rather, the progressive electoral turnaround of 2015 was an exception in the capital's electoral history.

A very different narrative unfolded in Barcelona. If the 2015 elections were those of indignation and rejection of austerity policies, the 2019 elections were marked by the bid for independence, which they called the '*procés*'. In response to the repression of the pro-independence movement, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), a pro-independence social-democratic party, won the greatest number of votes. However, Colau managed to keep the mayor's office through a pact with the PSC (the Catalan Socialist Party, with which she had governed for part of the first term), and the vote of the former French prime minister Manuel Valls, who had run in the municipal elections with a liberal-conservative, anti-independence campaign. This controversial move earned Colau the enmity of pro-independence activists and part of the alternative left.

The government agreement between Barcelona en Comú (the 'Comunes') and the socialists lasted throughout the legislature, which provided greater stability than in the first term, and allowed them to implement much of their electoral platform. However, the control of key areas such as economy, security and mobility by a right-leaning PSC limited the transformative impetus of Barcelona en Comú and produced conflicts that strained the party's supporting base and weakened its image as a transformative party.

It can be concluded that between 2015 and 2019 Barcelona en Comú promoted a more transformative agenda than Ahora Madrid. Moreover, Colau was a much more radical candidate and mayor than Carmena. This has to do in large part with the different socio-political make-up of the two capitals. While in Madrid the more neoliberal right has been dominant for decades, Barcelona has only had one clearly conservative mayor since the beginning of democracy in the Spanish state. This was Trias, with the pro-independence party Junts, between 2011 and 2015. Barcelona also has a much more powerful base of associations and activists than the state capital.

However, the differences in the political context between Catalonia and the rest of the Spanish state are probably the main factor in explaining the different fates of the municipalist candidates in the two cities in 2019. While the pro-independence *procés* gave impetus to a radicalised right-wing in Madrid, the repression of that *procés* mobilized the pro-independence electorate in Barcelona. Meanwhile, support for Barcelona en Comú suffered a degree of erosion due to its position in the pro-independence conflict. The Comunes supported the Catalan people's right to self-determination expressed through a referendum, without pronouncing themselves either for or against independence.

The transformation of Barcelona

Barcelona en Comú came to the city council with an ambitious agenda for transformation that covered all core aspects of municipal policy. However, in some areas the change was more visible than in others, for several reasons. First, because different levels of attention were given by the city government to each issue. Second, because there were different levels of intensity of bureaucratic or political resistance. Third, because of the uneven character of municipal powers. The capacity for action that Spanish municipal governments have is much greater in some areas (for instance urban planning) than in others (such as education or the economy).

Priorities also evolved over the two terms of office. The first term was focused on addressing the social crisis resulting from the 2008 financial crash and cutbacks to the welfare state, as well as more specific issues such as improving transparency and mechanisms for citizen participation in City Hall, two central issues for the 15-M Movement (the 'movement of the city squares' that emerged in 2011 and which would provide the backdrop to the birth of Podemos and the municipalist movements in the following years). In the second legislature the Comunes wanted to focus on urban transformation, increasing green and pedestrian spaces and reducing pollution, but the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 brought social issues to the forefront once more and delayed the large-scale works which had been in the pipeline.

Countering the Housing Crisis

Ada Colau became known throughout Spain as the spokesperson for the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH), which organised the political response to the wave of evictions caused by the real estate crisis that hit low-income families and those of migrant origin particularly hard. The PAH, created in 2009, became one of the main organizations in the cycle of protests that began in 2011.

The new mayor's concern with access to housing, one of the major social problems in Spanish capitals, resulted in a record investment in the construction of social housing (the city's public housing stock increased from 7,600 flats in 2015 to more than 11,000 in 2022) and innovative policies to guarantee the right to housing, one of the weakest points of the Spanish welfare state (only 2.5% of the housing stock is social housing, compared to the European average of 9.3%)^[1]. One of the most innovative measures was the creation of an anti-eviction unit to mediate between landlords and people threatened with eviction from their homes, which managed to stop 9 out of 10 evictions in the city, assisting more than 14,000 families up to 2023^[2].

New methods to expand of the pool of affordable public housing more quickly were also tested, such as industrial-style construction using shipping containers - a sustainable technique common in northern European countries but heavily criticized in Barcelona. Also symbolically important was the requirement that 30% of new developments be set aside for social housing, a regulation which was celebrated by social movements, but which so far has had limited results due to the slowdown in the pace of construction by private operators.

Tourism and economy

In 2015, surveys showed that tourism had become one of the main concerns of the citizens of Barcelona, one of Europe's major tourist destinations. The city suffered (and still suffers) from overcrowded streets, intolerable noise levels in some neighbourhoods, pollution caused by the giant cruise ships that dock in its port throughout the year and, above all, the rise in rent due to the proliferation of tourist flats. The new council banned new tourist flats from opening throughout the city and limited hotels in the centre, a measure criticized by economic elites who continue to present tourism as the panacea for unemployment. The plan achieved the goal of reducing the number of tourist flats, but tourism promotion institutions such as the Tourism Consortium (a public-private body with a strong business presence) were maintained, and visitor numbers continued to grow through the years of the Comunes' terms in office. In January 2024, 6 out of 10 respondents to a survey^[3] stated that on the city's capacity to receive tourists had reached its limit.

Tourism is a good illustration for one of the paradoxes of the Colau era. One of Europe's economic capitals was led by a mayor who was opposed to neoliberalism and highly critical of capitalism. This contradiction sometimes resulted in political capitulations. As a candidate, Colau opposed the Mobile World Congress (the world's leading mobile phone congress, held in Barcelona) but ultimately, as mayor, she praised it. Much the same happened with the America's Cup sailing event, which despite being criticised by social movements as a macro-event with no benefit to citizens, was welcomed with open arms by the municipal government (both are private events but depend on institutional support). In contrast, Colau strongly opposed the Catalan bid for the Winter Olympics, a project in a region plagued by drought, where snow is increasingly scarce. The Catalan government ultimately renounced the bid.

Beyond tourism and macro-events, the great contradiction of the Comunes in relation to the economy was that for most of their eight years in power, the city council's economic policy was in the hands of the PSC, a party with a social discourse but a markedly neoliberal orientation. Without an absolute majority, Barcelona en Comú was obliged to cede areas of government to its partner, and the socialists had a special interest in directing the city's economic policy and maintaining good relations with Barcelona's elites.

Despite the conservative economic policy of the PSC, the Comunes managed to give new impetus to the social and solidarity sectors of the economy in areas as diverse as housing cooperatives and culture. In addition, the city council created the largest incubator for cooperative start-ups in Europe in the former Can Batlló factory, providing long-term protection for a sector with considerable weight in Barcelona. Municipal procurement rules were also modified to introduce social, environmental and gender criteria, and the city's employment policy was reoriented to address the most precarious sectors.

Social policies

The fight against inequality was one of the central pillars of the political agenda of the Comunes when they entered the mayoral office in 2015. Social services are one of the main responsibilities of Spanish city councils, but their budgets and powers are clearly insufficient to tackle the high rates of poverty that are endemic in the Spanish state. The Spanish child poverty rate, for example, reached 27.8% in 2023^[4], during a time of economic growth.

While in power, Barcelona en Comú tested innovative income guarantee policies, stretching municipal powers to the maximum, in line with the party's position in favour of a universal basic income. Between 2016 and 2019 the city hosted one of the most significant basic income pilots in Europe, the B-MINCOME programme. However, these innovations did not enjoy much continuity due to bureaucratic resistance and lack of political impetus from the city government. The basic structure of social services remained unchanged after eight years, essentially retaining the disciplinary and assistance-oriented features determined by state legislation.

Innovative policies in areas such as homelessness and health, with the creation of new mental health and oral and dental care services, were continued. Here again, the municipal government stretched its powers to try to fill the gaps left by both the state and

Catalan regional health systems, to the point of facing complaints from the College of Dentists. The scope of municipal dental services was ultimately limited through legal action, but this and other health policies inspired legislative improvements such as the Law on public oral health care passed in 2020 in Catalonia. This virtuous cycle of imitation was repeated in several public policy areas.

Urban planning

The key area of responsibility for Spanish city councils is urban planning. This is the area in which they have the most room for manoeuvre and in which political and media coverage is most intense. While social policies that change the lives of thousands of people may go unnoticed by the local press, even small urban planning changes can make headlines and provoke political crises. In Barcelona, one of Europe's most densely populated cities, with a rich architectural tradition along with serious pollution problems, political battles over urban planning are especially fierce.

One of Colau's most criticized initiatives was 'tactical urbanism', which consisted of transforming urban space quickly using provisional elements (without carrying out any construction), for example, expanding pedestrian space. The media and political storm unleashed, based exclusively on aesthetic criteria, against these measures was astonishing. The right had a much harder time to credibly criticize the rapid growth of the network of bicycle lanes across the city, which doubled between 2015 and 2023.

But the star urban planning policy of the Comunes had to be the 'superblocks', which consisted of almost completely eliminating traffic from a set of streets, converting them into semi-pedestrianized areas. The first experiment, in the Poblenou district, provoked strong media and political opposition, but was well received by the neighbourhood due to the reduction of pollution and noise. The pattern repeated when the programme reached the Eixample district, in the heart of the city, but with more intensity. The 2023 election campaign revolved largely around the pedestrianization of some of the main streets in the centre, which until then had been, to all intents and purposes, urban highways (350,000 vehicles drove through Eixample daily before the reforms^[5]).

The resistance of the conservative opposition and the media establishment was compounded by the feeling in some sectors of the public that the City Council was paying more attention to the central areas of the city than to the more peripheral working-class neighbourhoods - which traditionally voted for the Socialist Party but brought the Comunes to power in 2015. Major transformations were also carried out in the outlying districts (pedestrianization, parks, improvements to school environments, among others) but they were less spectacular than calming the traffic on one of the city's main arteries and, what is more, received much less media attention.

Environmental policies

Beyond urban planning, Barcelona en Comú showed clear leadership in the fight against climate change, although in some cases fear of electoral losses prevented it from going as far as it could have. During Colau's governments, green spaces were expanded, public transport improved and private traffic in the city centre was reduced by 17% in 5 years^[6] - thanks to pedestrianization and the creation of a Low Emission Zone, a measure that generated discontent among some citizens as top-polluting vehicles were banned. However, recycling rates remained low due to a lack of political will to expand the door-to-door waste collection system.

Waste management is one of the main responsibilities of a municipality, and one of the most politically dangerous. In fact, the alleged dirtiness of the city was one of the principle electoral arguments of the opposition in the 2023 elections, despite the fact that the number of cleaning teams had multiplied. As in relation to security, the political and media right demonstrated a strong capacity to create a mental framework favourable to its objectives and independent of real trends in the data (which, incidentally, calls into question the fixation many progressive journalists and politicians have with data).

The major environmental conflict during the Colau era was the proposed expansion of El Prat Airport (located in a town near Barcelona), which was supported by business, the Spanish government and the main parties - including the PSC. Colau was the politician who most clearly opposed the expansion, which would have increased both pollution and tourist pressure on the city and would have damaged a protected natural area. After environmental protests and amid clashes with Catalonia's pro-independence government, the central state government suspended the extension plans. In her final years at the city's helm, the mayor also championed a limitation on cruise ships docking in Barcelona, a major source of pollution. In both cases, the decision was beyond the city's purview.

During Colau's last years as mayor, there was a growing demand among environmental movements for a toll to be charged to enter the city, a measure that would have considerably reduced private traffic and freed up resources for public transport. However, the municipal team's misgivings around the possible electoral cost and the need for an agreement with the Catalan government prevented the adoption of this measure, which would have reduced the high levels of air and noise pollution more quickly than the costly structural works being pushed by the Comunes.

Feminism and LGBTI

Feminist and LGBTI policies were one of the areas where the transformation put in place by Barcelona en Comú was most profound. The creation of a specific department was the first step in an ambitious political agenda, which developed in parallel to the growth of feminist protests in the streets. Perhaps the most relevant policy was the internal transformation of the city council, which went far beyond parity in senior political and technical positions: the government introduced a gender perspective in areas as diverse as urban planning, security and policies for the homeless, analyzing the differential impact of policies on women, and pursuing positive impacts

on equality. In addition, regulations were created to guarantee the permanence of feminist change within the institution, such as gender budgeting or the creation of civil service roles in charge of promoting equality.

Colau's government also doubled the resources dedicated to combating gender violence and providing assistance to its victims^[7], one of the main concerns voiced by the feminist movement. One of the major innovations here was the creation of a specific unit to provide assistance to victims of human trafficking, a groundbreaking measure in a country that still lacks a specific anti-trafficking law. Another pillar of feminist action in the city council was care policies, which were practically non-existent before 2015. A centre was created to serve people in need of care and also professional carers, mostly migrants in precarious situations. One of the most successful services was the municipal babysitting service, which offers free childcare hours for young children, to allow their mothers to have free time.

There were also significant changes in sexual and gender diversity, with the creation of an LGBTI Centre run by associations, which offers psychological and legal counselling, as well as promoting cultural content related to sexual diversity. Less well known but perhaps more transformative is the Transocupació service, which offers specific employment advice to transgender people, a group that suffers from a very high unemployment rate. A greater decentralisation of LGBTI policies in the city's districts is still pending. On a symbolic level, Ada Colau made a passionate defence of LGBTI rights on many occasions, contributing to the visibility of this agenda in a context of the rise of the ultra-right.

Citizen Participation

The demand for greater citizen participation in politics was one of the banners of the 15-M Movement and also of Colau's governments. Barcelona became an international example of citizen participation, with landmark achievements such as the creation of the free software digital participation platform Decidim, which is used by governments and organisations all over the world. In addition, the city had its first participatory budget, which allowed citizens to directly decide the allocation of some of the municipal investments, following the example established in Porto Alegre.

A new model of public-community management of common assets was also created, which allows the administration of municipally-owned spaces by associations for public interest purposes. The former industrial site of Can Batlló, occupied in 2011 by residents to reclaim it for social use, is the most emblematic example of this new policy, deepening the longstanding tradition of community management of municipal premises in Barcelona.

Security and coexistence

Security policies are a wall against which many left-wing governments have crashed. One of the most recent examples is that of Gabriel Boric in Chile, who has been dragged by media and political pressure into a punitive approach far removed from the tradition of the left. City councils, which are responsible for local policing in the Spanish state, have not escaped this pressure. In the case of Barcelona en Comú, an evolution can be seen from the first mandate (in which it governed alone), when responsibility for security policy was attributed to a figure recognised for his progressive stance, and the second. Here, the pact with the PSC led to the local police being placed under the command of a plainly conservative councillor. During the first mandate, progressive policies such as community policing were put in place, while in the second, the socialist councillor in charge of security took steps that social movements have labelled racist, such as raids against *manteros* (mostly undocumented migrants who sell products on the street without authorization), or joint operations with the National Police that ended in migrants being held in detention centres for being undocumented.

The decision to hand over the area of security to the socialists was probably related to the extremely strong media campaigns against the Comunes. For years, the media conveyed the message that Barcelona had become a dangerous city because of Colau's laxity with crime and, in particular, with squatters (an anecdotal phenomenon in quantitative terms but elevated by the political and media right wing to the level of a national drama). Naturally, press attention to crime increased in the months leading up to the 2023 elections, even though crime figures were down.

During the 2019-2023 term, the city council responded to pressure by increasing police recruitment and adopting punitive stances on issues such as multi offending in minor crimes, while the mayor maintained a progressive stance in the face of attempts to stigmatize the migrant and racialized population. As is often the case on the left, efforts to show concern for security did not yield the expected electoral result - it is likely that this issue had much to do with the 2023 defeat.

Managing the pandemic

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 disrupted all of Barcelona Council's plans, as well as those of the other public administrations. The city councils were on the front line of the health emergency and the socio-economic crisis caused by the lockdown. The city council, working with the Catalan health authorities, created a network of "health hotels" to house people who were unable to quarantine properly at home, and distributed food to the elderly so that they did not have to leave their homes.

The health crisis was soon compounded by a social disaster: thousands of workers in precarious jobs, excluded from the protective systems set up by the government, were left without resources from one day to the next. While neighbourhood networks sprang up to distribute food, the council fitted out exhibition centre pavilions to house the homeless in record time, in an unprecedented joint exercise with the army. Ambitious urban transformation projects were postponed, temporarily replaced by 'tactical urban planning'

measures aimed at expanding pedestrian space.

The COVID crisis forced Barcelona's rigid administration to transform itself for a few months. In a city obsessed with urban planning, social concerns came to the fore. The rigid divisions between purviews and hierarchies were blurred, with mixed working groups dedicated to solving the critical problems that arose every day, such as the purchase of masks and protective equipment for the municipal home care service for the elderly, the group most affected by the virus.

The usual bureaucratic and political resistance to innovation eased, allowing the implementation of policies that at other times had seemed impossible. The city council opened a residential centre for homeless people with addictions without opposition along with another for young people (most of them migrants without adult guardians, a group highly stigmatized by the right); a Covid fund for emergency economic aid that reached more than 30,000 families in the city (aligned with philosophies that emphasize autonomy and rights rather than charitable aid, inspired by the movement for a basic income); and an agreement was pushed through with the tourist flat owners to allocate them to people in emergency housing situations.

In Barcelona under COVID, Naomi Klein's 'shock doctrine' thesis was reversed: the emergency reinforced the power of a progressive administration to make changes, some of which were lasting. Certain tactical urban planning measures became permanent, bar terraces won space from car parks for good, new centres for the homeless were consolidated, and the lessons of the Covid Fund served to reduce bureaucracy in other social assistance schemes.

Barcelona en Comú, a different party?

A political jigsaw united by Colau's leadership

Barcelona en Comú was born in 2015, following the change of name of the 'Guanyem' party created the previous year. At that time the question of organization was widely debated on the Spanish left: under the slogan of a 'new politics', the leaders of Podemos and the municipalist parties expressed their intention to overcome the traditional party form, which was associated with the corruption rotting the two-party political system, and apply the horizontal principles of the 15-M Movement.

Barcelona en Comú's role in this debate was different from that of Podemos. The Barcelona party never implemented the primary system of votes open to the citizenry used during the early days of Pablo Iglesias' party - which, although initially mobilizing tens of thousands of people, soon became plebiscites for party leadership decisions. Instead, the Comunes established internal votes by party members, somewhat more akin to those of traditional parties, as well as non-binding participation mechanisms such as the candidate's 'listening processes' in which party affiliates weighted in on the list of electoral candidates.

The organizational structure agreed upon in 2015 has been maintained with few changes, thus avoiding the major disappointments experienced by the Podemos membership, who were promised an organization inspired by the 15-M assemblies and ultimately found themselves in a party with as vertical a structure as those founded in the 19th century. Although there have been ruptures and disappointed groups over the nearly 10 years since the creation of Barcelona en Comú, the situation is a far cry from the drain of members suffered by Podemos.

With few exceptions, the party has managed to maintain the cohesion of the various factions that created it. These include, on the one hand, members of Iniciativa per Catalunya-Verds (ICV) (the successor to the old Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya, which united socialists and communists in the 1930s) and, on the other, activists from diverse movements, many with a political culture hostile towards party politics. With virtuosity, the Comunes have managed to combine the experience of post-communist party members accustomed to the compromises and sacrifices of institutional politics with the transformative thrust of social movement activists more comfortable in street protests than in the offices of an institution. While the main structures of Spanish 'new politics' have been blown apart in processes of internal self-destruction televised practically live, Barcelona en Comú has kept its own inevitable disputes to an almost miraculous level of calm.

One of the main reasons for this exception is the undisputed leadership of Ada Colau, who, in addition to her activist background and her communication skills, has the considerable ability to navigate the stormy waters of institutional politics without forgetting the transformative ambitions that brought her to the mayor's office in 2015, despite proving herself willing to take controversial decisions to stay in power. Undoubtedly, one of the most difficult was accepting the support of Manuel Valls so she could be sworn in as mayor in 2019, meaning that, in the eyes of public opinion, the Comunes lost the position they had held in the Catalan independence conflict, by blocking the pro-independence Ernest Maragall as mayor. Although the decision was the result of an internal members' vote, Colau's influence was decisive in the result.

The figure of Colau has been the party's binding force and the visible face of the Comunes' political agenda. Moreover, Colau has had a considerable national and international presence, championing the defence of the right to housing and the fight against climate change beyond Barcelona. From the beginning, she aroused the loathing of elites who could not bear the idea of a woman with a working class, activist background occupying the mayor's office in Barcelona. Her image has suffered considerable erosion in opinion polls in recent years as a result of the contradictions she has faced over the years in the mayor's office and the harsh media and legal campaigns levelled against her.

In fact, Barcelona can be seen as a textbook case of the practice of *lawfare*, the legal warfare used against progressive governments and parties. Some of the best-known cases are the legal impeachment of Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the attempts by the Guatemalan Attorney General's Office to prevent the inauguration of president-elect Fernando Arévalo in 2023. Podemos suffered years of blatant legal persecution. Even more serious was the case of Catalan independence, unjustly persecuted not by private actors, but by the Spanish state. Between 2015 and 2023, Barcelona City Council, its mayor and many of its councillors were subjected to an avalanche of lawsuits and complaints about all kinds of measures they had taken. The complainants include conservative parties, investment funds, speculators and even phantom organisations presumably created by a multinational. The complaints were dismissed, but each one brought a corresponding wave of front page articles and news reports. Media attention to the dismissal of each charge was significantly lower. It is likely that *lawfare*, in addition to blocking some municipal policies, considerably damaged the image of the Comunes' and its leader's integrity - a particularly sensitive issue for a party acting under the banner of 'new politics'.

Colau's future has been widely discussed following her electoral defeat in 2023. As Latin American leftists are well aware, exceptional leadership is often key to breaking political inertia and allowing the radical left to come to power, but the inevitable need to have a successor for these figures can pose a huge headache that runs the risk of endangering political agendas. Barcelona en Comú's code of ethics generally limits the maximum number of eight-year consecutive mandates for which a person can hold public office to two. However it does allow for the possibility of an exceptional approval of a third mandate, which the members granted Colau to present her candidacy again in 2023. After the electoral defeat, many expected her to give up the leadership of the party. However, in January 2024 she announced her intention to remain in the city council, for now as an opposition councillor (a symptom of the difficulty of finding a replacement on a par with Colau). A fourth consecutive Colau campaign in 2027 would represent a move away from the principle of role rotation, one of the main features of the 'new politics' that transformed the Spanish institutional landscape.

Party, city council and social movements

Barcelona en Comú's strong internal cohesion can also be explained by the fact that it has been in power practically since it was founded - occupying institutional posts is one of the most effective adhesives for any party. Being in power for so long has allowed Barcelona en Comú to deploy its political agenda to a much greater extent than other municipalist candidacies in the Spanish state, but it has also come at an organizational cost for Barcelona en Comú; the top political leadership has in fact been in the city council (in the mayor's office, above all), while the party's other bodies have had very little political weight. It is still an open question whether the departure from the municipal government will increase the party's power or whether the councillors will remain the de facto leadership even when in opposition.

Finally, it is worth noting Barcelona en Comú's close connection with various social movements in the city, which is broader and more diverse than in other municipalist parties. As previously mentioned, Barcelona has a much stronger tradition of popular organization than Madrid and other cities. The new party managed to attract activists from a wide range of movements, such as housing rights groups, environmentalists, feminists and trade unionists. The presence in the city council of so many people who had been involved in activism facilitated a period of collaboration between the social grassroots and the institution, although the movements were still critical in the face of the inevitable frustration that came with some of the expectations placed on Colau's legislatures. More conflictive were the relationships with movements that emerged during the second term (2019-2023), such as some neighbourhood assemblies for the right to housing (in some cases with anarchist leanings, or related to the pro-independence left). These often protested against the limitations of municipal social and housing policies.

Lessons learnt

Analyzing the experience of Barcelona en Comú allows us to draw some conclusions that may be useful for other municipalist political movements beyond the specific context of Barcelona.

The power of the elites

Barcelona's political, economic and media establishment could not tolerate a party like Barcelona en Comú being in government, and did everything in their power to oust them, including media campaigns and a legal onslaught that weakened the credibility of Colau and her party. In 2023 the Spanish and pro-independence right-wingers united around the candidacy of Trias. By choosing Trias as the main target of their attacks during the election campaign, the Comunes indirectly contributed to strengthening his candidacy, underestimating the capacity of the conservative sectors to overcome their differences and concentrate the vote on one candidate. Even when they occupy a prominent position of institutional power, transformative municipalist groups will always face active opposition from the elites and will have to create and nurture the alliances they will need to confront them, with stakeholders such as social movements, other left-wing parties and the critical media.

Electoral balances

The electoral coalition that brought Colau to power in 2015 was an alliance of the middle and working classes. This electoral bloc changed over the 8 years of her time in the mayor's office, so that the middle classes came to represent a larger percentage of the Comunes' electorate. This change in the electoral coalition (partly due to the recovery of the Socialist Party among the popular

sectors) led Barcelona en Comú to increasingly emphasize the public policies appreciated by the middle classes, such as those related to education or urban transformation in its communications. Social issues oriented towards the working classes became less visible, partly because of the difficulty of getting media attention for these policies, and partly because they were considered less electorally attractive. However, it is precisely social issues, accompanied by a confrontational anti-elite discourse, that allow Barcelona en Comú to distinguish itself from other parties labelled as progressive. By moving to a more middle-class-oriented and less confrontational discourse, the Comunes lost elements of differentiation with respect to their direct electoral competitors. This example shows that municipalist projects are obliged to strike a difficult balance between purely electoral tactics and protecting their identity as a transformative force.

The party's autonomy from the institutions

The concentration of power in the hands of the mayor and the councillors imposed an institutional mindset on the party as a whole. The party bodies should have had more decision-making capacity, for example by setting public policy priorities and the policy of alliances with other political bodies independently from the executive team. Furthermore, a more balanced distribution of power between councillors and party bodies might have allowed them to be better prepared to face the loss of the mayor's office - by having a party less dependent on the institution (in areas from relations with social movements not mediated by the city council, to training activities and theoretical reflection, for example).

Leadership, an unresolved issue on the left

As a party, Barcelona en Comú is extremely dependent on the leadership of Ada Colau, who accumulated a lot of power during her years in office. Dependence on her as a figurehead is a weakness for the long-term continuity of the political party and succession is an unresolved issue. It is worrying that after so many cases of left-wing parties with problems of hyper-dependence on a charismatic leadership, on both sides of the Atlantic, it is still so difficult to discuss the issue collectively within organizations and find satisfactory solutions.

The curse of expectations

Managing expectations is one of the main challenges for a left-wing party coming to power for the first time. Without optimism and heroism, these parties cannot win. But if excessive expectations are raised, disappointment punishes them more severely than traditional parties. The Comunes suffered from the effects of excessive expectations during its first term, leading to an overly cautious attitude in some respects during the 2019-2023 term. For example, the fear of proposing ambitious public policies without knowing their technical feasibility beforehand hindered the 2023 election campaign. If the party had had more autonomy from the city council, the ambitions expressed in their political platform would surely have been greater, freed from the narrow mindset of what might be possible within the institution.

Good management does not win elections

Under Ada Colau's leadership, the most transformative political agenda Barcelona has seen in decades was deployed and the 2023 election campaign focused on explaining these changes, especially in urban planning. However, the example of Barcelona shows that management (alone) does not win elections, especially at the local level, where citizens often do not know which responsibilities correspond to which administration and many public policies are aimed at specific groups (as is the case with municipal social policies). For this reason, the fate of an election is often decided by elements external to the city (the debate on independence, for example) and in discussions on the policies most widely recognised as the responsibility of the city council: urban planning, waste management and security. Given the difficulty of winning elections solely by explaining how the city has been managed, transformative parties like Barcelona en Comú need strategies to maintain the emotional support of their electoral base, especially a confrontational discourse that follows the populist logic of highlighting the power of the elites (which include real estate and financial lobbies, and large electricity companies, among others).

Teams matter

Leaders' interests and areas of policy specialization largely determine which policies take priority. It is no coincidence that the city council created ambitious and cutting-edge housing policies, while its political programmes were relatively weaker in classic areas of economic policy, such as the promotion of specific industrial sectors, trade or the relationship with small businesses, due to its lack of experts in this area. (The relative weakness of the Comunes in economics is shared with other leftist organisations, which, after decades of neoliberalism, have difficulties in formulating concrete economic alternatives). To mitigate this, it is essential to form balanced political teams which incorporate different areas of expertise.

Institutions and social movements

The entry of numerous activists into the Comunes municipal government had the indirect effect of weakening the movements in which they had been active, although in general the activist base recovered well. Once in power, Colau's governments drew on the social movements' knowledge and proposals. Sometimes they were also pressured by movements, although this was considerably less the case than with city councils of other political orientations. However, there was neither a general disabling of the movements nor were they co-opted by the city council. The fact that the movements' autonomy was maintained across the eight years is crucial, since it is the movements - and not the parties - that are the engine of long-term political change.

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