The right to the city, the new municipalism and
the feminist politics of the commons:
Contributions and challenges from Mexico City, Barcelona
and beyond

by

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*Dedicated to Cristina and Fernando, my loving parents,
and to all those who affirm dignity and make the world a better place.*

Abstract

As contested spaces, urban settings express the complex dynamics of exploitation, oppression, and emancipation. Building on long-standing struggles, the right to the city and the new municipalist movements have been creating new imaginaries and material realities that foster the commons and confront privatization, gentrification, and exclusion. From Mexico City to Barcelona and beyond, this thesis analyzes the transformative agendas that multi-sectoral and multi-scalar alliances are putting forward as part of pedagogical-political processes of articulation and differentiation. Within a framework that combines the rights *in* the city, the rights *of* the city and the right *to* the city, I propose to conceptualize the right to (transform) the city as a tridimensional narrative-in-practice. Explicit feminist and decolonial lenses help me to identify some of the most salient limitations and potentials of these initiatives, opening questions and paths for further dialogue and collaboration across academic fields and social action.

Acknowledgements

The inspiration for the ideas and analysis presented in this thesis comes from multiple sources. During the past two decades, I have been fortunate enough to share the commitment, experience, and wisdom of hundreds of community activists and dear *compañeres* from around the world (too many to be named). Their struggles and work to protect and advance peoples' rights to housing and to the city have transformed the places and the societies they live in, and have given me the hope and conviction that another urban reality is not only possible but also already in the making. As part of the Habitat International Coalition and the Global Platform for the Right to the City, I have had the opportunity to learn and experiment around collective action with multiple groups at multiple scales, in ways that I suspect very few institutions can offer.

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I have developed this thesis in Ottawa, on the unceded and unsundered territory of the Omàmiwininiwag (Algonquin Anishinaabeg). As an immigrant, I feel grateful to be able to live and learn on First Nations lands, while acknowledging my responsibility to recognize and confront the historical and ongoing processes of dispossession and oppression (as I write, bodies and souls are once again shaken by further details about the atrocities committed at the residential school system and through "welfare" policies). My work intends to stand in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples' rights and their struggles for self-determination in this continent and around the world.

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Introduction

Problem statement, research question and intended contribution

Over the past two decades, the right to the city, the new municipalism and the (urban) commons have become central features in both academic debates and social practices among progressive forces confronting neoliberal globalization and the destructive urbanization, devaluation, and marketization of the public sphere as well as the commodification of all aspects of life. As theoretical and practical tools, these categories and the political agendas they inspire are now present in different movements, institutions and networks around the globe. An abundant, rich, and ever-expanding literature addresses their characteristics, potentials and limitations in building alternatives for more socially just, radically democratic and ecologically sustainable societies.

Although in recent years some interesting cross-referencing of the right to the city, the new municipalism and the commons is emerging, there are some important gaps and missing “conversations” that this research tackles and explores at two levels. More “internally”, it analyzes the explicit and implicit connections between right to the city and new municipalist movements, as well as their more specific elements and what they can potentially learn from each other. More “externally”, I attempt to identify the contributions that these urban processes are making to broader debates and experimentations around the commons, social reproduction, and the feminization of politics.

In this framework, my inquiry seeks to understand how the right to the city and new municipalist movements are (re)creating and expanding the feminist (and decolonial) politics of the commons. My intention is to accomplish this objective by looking at two particular but certainly interconnected dimensions: 1) salient collective narratives and

collaborative practices that are being put forward (including social movements' initiatives and co-produced public policies); and 2) the role of multi-sectoral and multi-scalar alliances in advancing these processes, with some consideration of the voices included and those still missing.

One of the main arguments to be advanced is that the (shared) visions and experimentations fostered by the right to the city and new municipalist movements in places like Mexico City and Barcelona constitute key pathways for the creation of non-capitalist, anti-patriarchal and potentially decolonial presents and futures through what I call a tridimensional narrative-in-practice. The right to (transform) the city is presented as a connecting and expanding strategy that articulates (collective) rights, autonomy, and socio-spatial justice under three different but articulated approaches: the rights *in* the city (territorialized rights), the rights *of* the city (radicalized democracy) and the right *to* the city (de-commodified socio-spatial relations). The hyphenated formulation highlights the complex and intertwined nature of their initiatives, that skillfully combine conceptual elaborations and socio-political actions. In analyzing what I consider to be some their most relevant contributions, my research examines how these movements are approaching crucial transformative components, such as: a) the rural/urban divide, highlighting instead a more integral and multilayered territorial approach; b) the productive/reproductive spheres, by putting social reproduction and an ethics of care at the center of narratives and practices; c) the public/private spheres, on the one hand redefining the commons and fostering public-community collaborations and, on the other, denaturalizing patriarchal behaviours and experimenting with more feminist alternatives; and, d) the confinements of

the “local/global”, creating multi-scalar, material and symbolic spaces for learning and mobilizing.

With this kind of analysis, I want to position my understanding of the right to the city and new municipalist movements as clearly differentiated from mainstream discourses praising “inevitable urbanization” and technocratic visions of “urban governance”. At the same time, my approach would focus on and move within a kind of “meso” spatial and political terrain, trying to overcome pendular frameworks and fixed conceptions that privilege either the micro or the macro, the concrete or the abstract, or treat cases as mere illustrations of overarching theories. As much as possible, and when appropriate, references to diverse materials in languages other than English and cosmovisions other than western-centric ones are included as working tools to expand the analysis.

More concretely, my research seeks to make a twofold contribution. On the one hand, I analyze the potentials and limitations of the right to the city and new municipalist approaches in order to critically contribute to current debates and ongoing initiatives within and between these movements. On the other, I identify, both in theory and in practice, relevant gaps and overlapping elements around themes and strategies that could feed interesting dialogues and practical collaborations between diverse actors and sectors to foster social change and multidisciplinary inquiries linked to the politics of the commons.

My interest in these topics is based on twenty years of direct involvement in many of these local and international processes as part of civil society global organizations. I take advantage of my first-hand experience in networking and advocacy activities within social movements and multi-sectoral alliances in Mexico City and Barcelona, to include them as case studies in this thesis. These examples, I argue, are especially relevant because they

can be considered as leading forces on the right to the city and new municipalist international movements, as well as the fact that a good number of linkages and cross-fertilizing dynamics between them have been in place for quite some time.

Some of these initiatives are certainly well documented independently but, to my knowledge, there are so far no similar attempts to map out their multiple existing and potential connections. At the same time, my research approach highlights not just their explicit and implicit articulations but also their political and epistemological richness as “sites” of knowledge creation around the politics of the commons. It is my hope that, although based on these specific accounts, my research findings will open paths to identify and understand similar processes taking place in and between other cities and regions.

Methodological considerations

To accomplish my objective, I rely on the qualitative analysis of a wide range of available academic and non-academic, written and audiovisual materials coming from primary, secondary and tertiary sources. Overall, a feminist approach allows for a focus on the ethics of care, everyday life and the (spatial) dimensions of social reproduction, as well as the role of women and the feminization of politics. To the extent possible, this is combined with the identification of both existing and missing decolonial components, pointing out relevant omissions and possibilities for further exploration.

Case studies and sources

Mexico City and Barcelona serve as key sites for my research, as they can be considered leading forces behind the right to the city and the new municipalist movements, at the same time connecting local processes with international mobilization and advocacy efforts

through multi-sectoral and multi-scalar platforms and networks. The specific contents of some of the narratives and practices being produced, as well as the extent to which marginalized voices have been included and their actual/potential relevance, are analyzed by looking at three broad categories of texts, including primary, secondary, and tertiary sources:

- First, the materials produced by the movements themselves, including different kinds of declarations and manifestos, charters, press releases, news broadcasts, documentaries, and video/audio interviews. Among these, I particularly rely on the contents of the World Charter for the Right to the City (2005), the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City (2010), the *Barcelona en Comú* political platform (2014, 2015, 2019) and the Fearless Cities Guidebook (Junqué & Shea Baird, 2018), as well as the documentaries *Ada for Mayor* (Faus, 2016) and *Push* (Gerten, 2019), as they provide valuable details of the theoretical and programmatic definitions these movements attach to the right to the city, the new municipalism and the commons.
- Secondly, selected legal and policy documents, such as Brazil's City Statute (2001), the Mexico City Constitution (2017) and the New Urban Agenda (2016), with the aim of tracking how official debates on the right to the city have changed over time in connection with grassroots and civil society proposals.
- Thirdly, academic and non-academic articles and books that describe and evaluate the narratives and practices around the right to the city, new municipalism and the commons. These materials are available in print or through electronic publications, websites, online blogs, and virtual "observatories" and databases with relevant

information related to my topic, such as the Minim Municipalist Observatory and the Transformative Cities Award and Atlas of Utopias (I am currently collaborating with both initiatives and have access to a wide range of materials and ongoing debates).

To investigate the role of multi-sectoral and multi-scalar networks, I look at particular actors and some of the trans-local and international spaces for mobilization, learning and advocacy they have promoted in past years. These include the Habitat International Coalition, the Global Platform for the Right to the City, the Fearless Cities, and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). In these cases, two main bodies of materials are taken into consideration to provide both an internal and an external point of view in terms of their composition, goals, strategies, and agendas. The first group of materials includes grey literature such as reports, minutes from meetings, working papers, projects, and evaluations, available online or by request through my personal connections with these organizations. The second group consists of academic and non-academic articles, news and official documents that explicitly analyze or refer to the work of these specific actors.

Personal background and positionality

As stated earlier on, my interest and practical knowledge on these processes are due to twenty years of direct involvement with housing rights and right to the city movements and networks across the world, but with a particular focus on Mexico City, where I lived for 16 years (1999 to 2015), and Barcelona, where I have traveled many times since 2004 and where I remain in close contact with friends and colleagues. Over these years, first as the Latin American coordinator (2003-2011) and then as elected president (2011-2019) of the

Habitat International Coalition (HIC), I had the opportunity to promote and participate in countless mobilizing, learning and advocacy activities with hundreds of organizations and a wide range of institutions.

An important portion of my work in this context was dedicated to exchanges and debates that would eventually produce the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City (2007-2010), a recognized milestone in advancing the contents and guidelines for defining and implementing this new collective right. As mentioned, this process was closely connected with other local and international initiatives, such as the World Charter for the Right to the City (2005) produced at several World Social Forums (2003-2005), at which I also participated. At least two relevant meetings for this process took place in Barcelona (2004 and 2005), with the active involvement of local organizations and activists/squatters, some of whom—including current Mayor Ada Colau—are now in charge of the local government as part of the *Barcelona en Comú* political and electoral platform. From then on, several international exchanges and alliance-building activities were facilitated under the HIC umbrella. During the past six years, I have also been involved in the promotion of the Global Platform for the Right to the City, a multi-sectoral space for collective multi-scalar action composed by social movements, civil society organizations, professionals and academics, and progressive local governments.

My connection with the municipalist movement is relatively more recent and less direct, but nonetheless includes first-hand information and participation in many of the processes and documents studied within this research. Also linked to the World Social Forum dynamic was the Forum of Local Authorities which, in dialogue with grassroots and civil society networks like HIC, produced a World Charter-Agenda on Human Rights

in the City (2008-2011) that also includes the right to the city. Although being a more “institutional” document, it shows the ongoing efforts to, on the one hand, build a stronger alliance between progressive local governments and social movements, and on the other, to go beyond human rights and democracy in developing a more integral and transformative right to the city at the core of their narratives and proposals. During the past years, and particularly in the context of the Habitat III processes and the debates pertaining the elaboration of the New Urban Agenda (2016), I had the opportunity to participate in several meetings and public actions with Mayors from the Fearless Cities and the municipalist movement, including the drafting of the Cities for Housing Manifesto and its presentation to the United Nations General Assembly (2018).

Invested as I was and still am in these processes, I am aware that this position represents both important advantages and challenges. I hope that the former has been made clear in the previous paragraphs and pages. As for the latter, I should at least point out the risks of excess of empathy and lack of critical distance to evaluate their characteristics and impacts. In order to minimize those risks, I make my involvement and positionality explicit from the outset and try to provide careful demarcations between my own opinions from those of other actors throughout the thesis. Additionally, I am also aware of language challenges and possibilities (being English my second language and because many relevant documents from Mexico City and Barcelona are available in Spanish only) and make them explicit whenever necessary to better contextualize my analysis, its preferences and limitations.

Outline of the thesis

This thesis is organized in four main chapters. The first chapter presents the theoretical framework and a discussion of the key concepts that guide my subsequent analysis. By engaging with the multi-disciplinary literature coming from critical urban studies, new municipalism and radical democracy, and social reproduction and the (urban) commons, I identify crucial conceptual and methodological insights as well as important gaps that my research approach seeks to address. More particularly, I highlight how scholars have overlooked the epistemological formulations arising from grounded experimentations by multiple social actors as well as the oversimplification with which their complex and sophisticated political strategies often get treated. Further details of some of those tensions and their problematic implications are included in subsequent chapters.

Chapter two focuses on the contributions of social movements in expanding the narratives and practices on the right to the city. Setting my analysis in the Latin American context in general and in Mexico City in particular, I trace a brief genealogy of contemporary struggles for socio-spatial justice and democratization to find the deep history and the many names that the right to the city can assume in practice. Crucial concepts such as urban reform, the social production of habitat, *autogestión* and *poder popular* are foregrounded to sustain my argument that key components in Lefebvre's work are in fact found there as part of long-standing transformative agendas. In strong connection with *campesinxs*' and Indigenous Peoples' claims and practices, it is possible to see how the notion of territory is mobilized as part of pedagogical and normative proposals that seek a substantive (and potentially decolonial) redistribution of power and resources. Furthermore, the contents and socio-political processes linked to the Mexico

City Charter for the Right to the City (2010) also offer a productive field for reflection around possibilities and challenges arising from multi-sectoral and multi-scalar alliances.

Turning to Barcelona, the third chapter presents the main characteristics of the new municipalist movement that gained momentum across Spain and other countries/regions in recent years. A mapping exercise of both explicit and implicit connections with the right to the city actors and processes shows the many elements they share, as well as the potential for more permanent and systematic conversations. Fundamental contributions are identified in the political programme and policy implementation of *Barcelona en Comú*, particularly around critical issues such as the feminization of politics, caring cities and feminist urbanism, and urban commoning through public-community partnerships. Comparing the way academic literature deals with the right to the city and the new municipalist movements, my research traces the unequal treatment of social organizations' contributions in knowledge creation as well as an inconsistent valuation of the inside-outside strategies that they both utilize in relation to government institutions.

The final chapter is dedicated to two main objectives. The first one is to complement the key findings of the previous chapters with a detailed analysis of the role that multi-sectoral and multi-scalar alliances have been playing in pushing forward the right to the city and neomunicipalist agendas—including some consideration of the internal and external challenges they face. A closer look at some of the particular networks and dynamics of the World Social Forum and other international gatherings uncovers multiple pedagogical-political processes of articulation and differentiation that cut across and connect local, more-than-local and global dimensions. As part of the second objective, the remainder of chapter four and the concluding remarks propose a critical inquiry of the

right to the city, the commons and radical democracy from a decolonial perspective. Here, I address some difficult questions, such as the possibilities and limitations for urban utopias to overcome a modern/colonial framework (or the “colonial matrix of power” in Mignolo’s terms) while still acting within its material and epistemological constraints. I then propose to understand the right to the city and the new municipalist movements as a tridimensional narrative-in-practice composed by the rights *in* the city, the rights *of* the cities and the right *to* the city in order to further assess and strengthen their transformative and decolonial potential.

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework and key concepts

Three broad theoretical streams provide the analytical and methodological tools for framing my research, as well as the identification of existing gaps and my contributions to addressing them. These include: a) critical geography and urban studies dealing with the right to the city; b) radical democracy and new municipalism; c) the (urban) commons and social reproduction. To the extent possible, I incorporate a cross-cutting focus on feminist and decolonial perspectives.

Before proceeding with an overview of key insights and arguments from selected authors within this literature, I turn first to highlighting some salient features that the right to the city, the new municipalism and the commons, as both epistemological and political tools, seem to share. Interestingly enough, the three of them refer to categories that have a profound historic dimension, whose roots can be counted not just in centuries but even in millennia, dating back to well before nation-states and capitalist market economy became the predominant forms of organizing societies. Similarly, since the last decades of the twentieth century, all of them have been activated in different moments and settings, but always denouncing the multilayered crisis provoked by (neoliberal) capitalism and illuminating the search for alternatives. At the same time, all of them are very dynamic concepts, in permanent (de)construction by a wide range of scholars (and social movements too, as we shall see) from very diverse disciplines (such as geography, sociology, history, political philosophy, political economy, feminism, critical legal and international studies, to mention but a few).

It can also be argued that the academics and social movements dealing with these rich fields of epistemological and political contestation seem more interested in

understanding and connecting imaginaries and practices than in developing overarching theories. As for their contents, they all include intertwined, complex economic/political¹ and material/symbolic dimensions, including several explicit and elaborated considerations of space and scale. Finally, it is possible to affirm that these three categories seem to privilege the *what for* (transformational goals) and the *how* (means, including concrete activities and mechanisms) over the *what* (mere list of demands), emphasizing strategies that seek to (re)create radically different realities beyond the state and the market.

The right to the city, against and beyond capitalist urbanization

During the second half of the twentieth century, French intellectual Henri Lefebvre produced groundbreaking contributions that introduced space and scale in Marxist thinking, while at the same time incorporating historical materialism into geographical theorizing. In the context of post-Fordist economic transformations and the social and political unrest of the Cold War, he clearly understood that the process of urbanization was not only crucial for “the survival of capitalism”—and consequently a fundamental *locus* for class struggle— but also that this force was in fact erasing the distinctions between the rural and the urban, producing integrated spaces within the national territories and beyond (Harvey, 2008, p. 28). As a firsthand witness and to some extent participant in the 1968 May revolts in Paris, Lefebvre coined powerful concepts such as the “Right to the City” and the “Urban Revolution” that still resonate with many academics and social movements today.

¹ It is worth mentioning that Polanyi’s (2001) concerns over the artificial and problematic separation of economic and political (social) dimensions under capitalism are present in discourses around the right to the city, the new municipalism and the commons.

Faced with the impacts of a functionalist, fragmentary urbanism that turned the city into a commodity, a tool of exploitation and control at the service of the ruling class, this philosopher, sociologist, and activist claimed the city as a collective *oeuvre* for the transformation towards a more just and emancipatory society. He imagined and advocated for a city without marginalized inhabitants or neighbourhoods, a city that could reflect and create vibrant communities within self-managed territories that prioritized the dimensions and dynamics of everyday life. Lefebvre theorized a right that is at the same time a commitment, since it implies the need to democratize society and urban life not simply by accessing what exists but by transforming and renewing it. To do this, he highlighted two fundamental strategies: to reclaim the right of all to participate in the decision-making that affects individual and collective life in the city, and the right to recover the social function of property —that is, in Marxian terms, to prioritize its use value over its exchange value (Lefebvre, 1968/1996).

It is widely recognized that Lefebvre's insights have had longstanding theoretical and political impacts. Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have since built on his prolific intellectual legacy (Attoh, 2011; Brenner, 2009; Brenner, Marcuse & Mayer, 2012; Costes, 2012; Harvey, 2008, 2011, 2012; Marcuse, 2009a, 2009b; Purcell, 2003, 2013a, 2013b). Notably, geographers and sociologists have expanded on his analysis of space as a social product to incorporate gender dimensions (Fenster, 2005; Little, Peake & Richardson, 1988; Massey, 1994; Mitchell, Marston & Katz, 2004), neighbourhood-based social movements as a broader category than the proletariat (Castells, 1974/2004, 1983) as well as elaborating on the specific characteristics of these processes in cities worldwide. In an often parallel but not necessarily connected dynamic, current feminist discussions

around social reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2016; Giardini & Simone, 2015; Hall, 2016) and the commons (Federici, 2010, 2012, 2013; Quiroga Díaz & Gago, 2014) have also proven to be burgeoning fields, with evident spatial and scalar implications. My own research attempts to map the already existing and promising linkages between these areas and the right to the city and the new municipalism.

Along with the reinvigorated debates among scholars from different regions, references to this “new” and collective right can be found both in urban social movements and official documents in cities across the globe. A considerable amount of energy has been devoted to documenting and analyzing the characteristics and significance of these socio-political processes, highlighting their struggles against the impacts of neoliberal urbanization as well as the elaboration of imaginaries and principles for more just, democratic, and sustainable societies (Díaz & Ortiz Flores, 2018; Sugranyes & Mathivet, 2011). But this more “practical” oriented inquiry seems only very partially accounted for in the innumerable academic articles that have so far addressed the theoretical implications and tensions of diverse “applications” of Lefebvre’s work. My research focuses on the former, while also trying to point out some of the important contributions that I feel are missing in the latter.

At this point, it is worth referring to the highly influential article that the British geographer David Harvey published in 2008 on the very topic of the right to the city. Written exactly on the 40th anniversary of Lefebvre’s book —and amid the last economic and financial global crisis and the resulting crash in the housing market— this piece accomplished in my opinion two main tasks, although not without some relevant shortcomings and limitations. On the one hand, it provided a detailed historical account of

the “intimate connection (...) between the development of capitalism and urbanization” in two paradigmatic cases (Harvey, 2008, p. 24). In order to explain the characteristics and implications of massive city renewal projects in Haussmann’s Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century and Moses’s New York City a century later, Harvey (2008) deploys three particular categories: “spatio-temporal fixes” for value surpluses, “creative destruction” and “accumulation by dispossession”. These concepts, widely applied by a broad range of academics, have proven useful to describe and understand similar on-going processes in cities and territories around the world. However, I would argue, they seem to put too much attention on capital-state dimensions and dynamics, presenting a detailed but somehow monolithic picture of economic and political processes, and consequentially ascribing just a resistance role to the social movements. Similarly, gender-based, feminist and decolonial considerations appear to be still relegated, when not totally absent, in many analyses. By connecting urban social struggles under the umbrellas of the right to the city, the new municipalism and the commons, my research tries to paint a different picture.

On the other hand, Harvey’s article certainly represents an interesting and relevant attempt to provide a kind of definition of the right to the city, a concept that Lefebvre, more attached to a philosophical humanist tradition than to a social science one, discussed in a more “metaphysical” manner as a “rallying cry and a demand” (Lefebvre, 1968/1996, p. 158). In what I would argue represents a clear alignment with the practical contents attached to the right to the city by local social movements and international networks alike, Harvey (2008) categorically differentiates this new collective right from individual human rights and their liberal focus on private property. Consequently, he attaches to it a more radical transformative significance, since it “inevitably depends upon the exercise of a

collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization” (Harvey, 2008, p. 23). According to Harvey’s vision (2008), the democratic management of surplus value is what should be at the center of the strategy to implement the right to the city —something that, he laments, is still elusive given the fragmented nature of urban and peri-urban movements. Based on my working experience in local and international processes, I engage with Harvey’s interpretation by trying to show how several movements are not only expanding the conceptualization of the right to the city but also building social power through cross-sectoral and multi-scalar² alliances. In fact, Harvey (2012) later recognized that the explanation for the “revival” of the right to the city is not so much attached to Lefebvre’s legacy but to the struggles of urban social movements, highlighting how its very definition is simultaneously a kind of “empty signifier” as well as a prolific terrain for contestation (Harvey, 2012, pp. xi-xv).

Either with or without explicit references to Lefebvre’s work, it is possible to affirm that all these elements have been central to the urban agendas of dozens of organizations in cities around the world (Brenner, Marcuse & Mayer, 2012; Ortiz Flores, Nehls & Zárate, 2008; Sugranyes & Mathivet 2011). Particularly relevant for my analysis are the developments that were taking place during the second half of the twentieth century in several Latin American cities, where the advance of *popular* urbanization (“the city made

² Together with space (and place), scale is one of the key categories used in critical geography and urban studies. Understood as a social construct that organizes social relations, scales are at the same time relational –i.e., the local, national, and global can be defined only in relation to each other. Whether considering class, gender and/or racial analyses, scale has become a crucial device to explain (and potentially alter) power dynamics of both oppression and emancipation manifesting in bodies, communities, and territories. Moving away from both “methodological nationalism” (Brenner) and theories that privilege the world scale (Wallerstein and Frank) scholars like Mahon and Keil (2009) highlight the need of a “multi-scalar approach” (p. 10). Building on those insights, Tomiak (2011, 2016) have shown the relevance of the multi-scalar strategies put forward by Indigenous Peoples confronting and navigating the settler-colonial Canadian politics in recent decades. I take inspiration from such literature to consider the multiple scales at which the narratives and practices of the right to the city and new municipalist movements are being articulated and implemented, as a transformative tool challenging artificial and hierarchical boundaries.

by the people”, through processes that have been conceptualized as the “social production of habitat”) was already clearly visible, as detailed in Chapter two. Linked in most cases to the industrialization processes that, with various rhythms and characteristics, began during the interwar period, a massive migration from the countryside to cities across the region peaked between the 1940s and 1980s. Demands for access to land, housing and public facilities, paired with greater democratic participation, were central to the gradual formation of a movement for urban reform that, inspired by the postulates of the agrarian reform, was gaining strength and managed to produce relevant constitutional reforms and normative frameworks that established the social and ecological function of property and the democratic management of the city as fundamental guiding axes for urban planning.

Despite multiple limitations and setbacks in their effective implementation, these legal and political tools became a relevant and explicit source of inspiration for both international and local processes in several places. The World Charter for the Right to the City, elaborated in the framework of the World Social Forum between 2002 and 2005, represents a very significant milestone for it allows for the mobilizing and networking of existing movements, while at the same time sparking numerous social, academic and political initiatives (Ortiz Flores, Nehls & Zárate 2008; Sugranyes & Mathivet 2011).³ One of these, led by the Urban Popular Movement (*Movimiento Urbano Popular*, MUP) in Mexico City, crystallized a few years later in a local Charter for the Right to the City (2010).⁴ Notably, many of its contents are now included in the first-ever Mexico City

³ One salient example being the inclusion of the right to the city and contents directly extracted from this Charter in the Nacional Constitution of Ecuador approved in 2008. For more details and analysis of some of these processes and documents see Ortiz Flores, Nehls & Zárate (2008). More recent examples include the Gwangju Guiding Principles for a Human Rights City (2014) and the Right to the City Charter for Greater Beirut (2018).

⁴ For details on the process and contents of this Charter, and its connections with international debates see Ramírez Zaragoza (2013) and Wigle & Zárate (2010, 2012).

Constitution (2017). These local developments served to amplify international learning and advocacy efforts, with the 2014 launch of the Global Platform for the Right to the City as an important space of confluence of diverse actors and multi-scalar strategies.

As my qualitative analysis of relevant narratives and practices being produced by urban social movements in Mexico and internationally shows, the key elements identified by Lefebvre half a century ago have been critically expanded by considering the realities, demands and innovations from the global South and other-than-western world-visions, as well as the potential for alliance building across movements often divided along thematic and sectoral lines. The most relevant among these includes the recognition and support of a socially produced habitat/city and diverse, *popular* economies; the collective, responsible management of the commons, emphasizing ecological dimensions beyond administrative boundaries and property regimes; and finally, radicalized notions of citizenship and democracy.

New municipalism and feminist politics

As with the right to the city, several scholars agree that in recent years we are witnessing a “renascent” municipalist movement (Finley, 2017; Junqué & Shea Baird, 2018; Roth & Shea Baird, 2017; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017; Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2020) linked to the contestation of neoliberal urbanization and the rejection of austerity measures imposed in the context of the post-2008 economic crisis. Usually understood as “the democratic autonomy of municipalities (from parishes to metropolitan boroughs to city-regions) over political and economic life *vis-à-vis* the nation-state”, these authors highlight the “re-politicization” and “democratic radicalization” of the local sphere as salient features of the

so-called new municipalism (Thompson, 2020, p. 1). According to these analyses, this turn has been enabled by recovering theoretical insights coming from libertarian municipalism and confederalism (notably in the work of Bookchin), the right to the city (Lefebvre and subsequent contributions), and the commons and feminist approaches focusing on social reproduction, everyday life, and the feminization of politics.

I would add that, although not always mentioned in this literature, the work of Rancière (2001) is also relevant for the understanding of “politics” that these movements seem to embody. A fundamental element here is the notion of a political subject that is not preexistent or predetermined but, on the contrary, defined by its participation in a “political relationship” (Rancière, 2001). This open, dynamic, contingent definition correlates with a conceptualization of democracy not just as “a” political regime but as “the” regime of politics, the only one that allows for the confrontation between different logics of inclusion—who counts as part of the community—and not merely the opposition of well-defined and more or less static interest groups (Rancière, 2001, p. 9). As in the classic Greek tradition, the public space (a fundamental feature of the right to the city, the new municipalism and the commons) is then a key actor through which the construction of political agents and the manifestations of the productive tensions of dissensus are possible.⁵

It was certainly in the streets and squares of cities around the globe that, between 2007 and 2015, multiple and massive movements like Occupy, *Indignad@s* or the Arab Spring⁶ were actively denouncing rising inequality, corporate privileges and their criminal-

⁵ When taken from a decolonial approach, crucial categories in the western tradition—like public space—certainly reveal their problematic nature and limitations. With that in mind, Chapter four engages in the discussion of human rights, citizenship, and democracy, as some of the most relevant notions underpinning the principles and agendas of the social movements involved with the right to the city, the new municipalism and the commons.

⁶ Similar waves have appeared since then, including a particularly strong one in several Latin American and some Middle Eastern countries during 2019.

like practices, the squeezing of the public sphere and social rights, and the imposition of authoritarian, technocratic regimes. In short, they were all claiming and at the same time experimenting with creative material and political ways of organizing that, in many cases, were transformed into broader agendas for newly formed independent parties and local electoral platforms. Although often recognized as discrete genealogies, many of these movements were, in my opinion, engaging with and explicitly re-signifying several intertwined elements from the right to the city, the new municipalism and the commons.

When analyzing the recent development of the new municipalist movement in several Spanish cities, Rubio-Pueyo (2017) outlines what he considers its most prominent features, highlighting the centrality of narratives and practices around the commons.⁷ More specifically, these include four key dimensions: the deepening of the practice of democracy by way of mobilizations and alliances that go beyond political parties, electoral logics and conventional leadership (promoting “confluences” and “overflows”); an expanded notion of citizenship delinked from the liberal, nationality-based legal status and reattached to social rights (i.e. housing, food, health, education); the feminization of politics, prioritizing non-patriarchal and more horizontal relations and decision-making spaces; and, an economy reoriented towards social reproduction over profit-making activities with renewed support for the social and solidarity economy, the re-municipalization of basic services (i.e. water and energy) and new public-community partnerships. Most of these elements have also been central to the movements for the right to the city, although overlapping and explicit influences have only very recently started to be analyzed and seem

⁷ It is revealing that several of the newly formed political and electoral platforms in cities across Spain choose “in common” as a kind of shared last name (i.e., *Barcelona en Comú*, *Córdoba en Común*, *Zaragoza en Común*). See Chapter three for more details.

to remain more or less confined to linkages and lineages at the theoretical level (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017; Thompson, 2020). My direct involvement in some of these processes allows for an exploration of these issues from a different entry/vantage point, mapping out their connections as well as their specificities not only at the conceptual but also at the socio-political level through my focus on the politics on the commons.

In my estimation, these initiatives show a highly sophisticated approach to space and multi-scalar strategies for simultaneously navigating between neighbourhood, metropolitan and trans-local levels. If proximity is clearly seen through the lenses of social reproduction, the feminist approach is equally prominent on the agenda for international relations. Challenging the recurrent critiques about the immanent risks of localism and parochialism, and (re)creating long-standing historic connective roots, the City of Barcelona's has been the leading force behind Fearless Cities since 2017, a new global articulation of progressive urban movements and local governments. Affective politics and the ethics of care⁸ are then at the centre of narratives and practices in a wide range of cities and regions that are been proclaimed "refuges" or "sanctuaries" in different continents to welcome migrants and refugees; "rebel" cities against national or international policies that seek to impose austerity agendas and greater social injustice; "brave" cities that oppose transnational speculative lobbies; cities "free" from extractive practices; or "caring" cities that put people and everyday life at the core of its ethics, proposing a feminist urbanism sensitive to the differentiated spatio-temporal individual and collective experiences of age, identities, and socio-economic conditions. Although not always explicit, an underlying

⁸ In the western-Anglo world, usually linked to the work of Tronto (1994, 2017). For interesting connections with pluriversal and decolonial approaches see FitzGerald (2020) and Robinson (2020).

notion of the commons can certainly be detected in most of these transformative urban agendas.

Apparently from outside of and in parallel to the municipalist and the right to the city traditions, the contributions of Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2015)⁹ seem particularly relevant for broadening the scope of existing analyses, with voices and lessons coming from the Latin American context. Among many other pertinent elements, there are at least three categories that clearly resonate with the new municipalist postulates and the connections with the right to the city and the commons: *desbordes* (overflows), *política en femenino* (politics in feminine), and *entramados comunitarios* (communitarian lattices or webs).¹⁰ Interestingly, Gutiérrez traces their emergence also as a result of the massive confrontations with the neoliberal wave that swept across the region during the 1990s which was instrumental in bringing more progressive forces into national governments in several countries at the beginning of the new millennium. The *desbordes* were then a key strategy for social movements to go beyond the constraints of the liberal, representative, institutional democracy, and its bureaucratic, elitist, political parties. The *política en femenino* was in fact the bold commitment to rethink social transformation from the fundamental standpoint of the reproduction of life rather than the accumulation of capital (Federici, 2013), with an ethics of care guiding all individual and collective actions. Finally, the *entramados comunitarios* represent at the same time the overall goal and the concrete, organizational tools needed to achieve a more just, horizontal and ecological society.

⁹ See also Gutiérrez Aguilar, Navarro Trujillo and Linsalata (2016).

¹⁰ From a political ontology field, authors like Blaser and de la Cadena (2017) offer a critical perspective on the commons with inspiring insights on the “equivocations” and “partial connections” between worlds, including human and more-than-human relations.

Questioning rational, modernist linear conceptions of time, and flat, unidimensional notions of space, Gutiérrez (2015) brings in Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and traditions such as *Pachakuti* —a concept that weaves together the intimate/domestic and the commons in a way that does not correspond with a binary notion of the private and the public spheres— to explain how collective forms of material reproduction and decision-making take place on an everyday basis.¹¹ In her analysis, these constitute essential elements that would not only help with understanding the tensions between the self-defined progressive governments of the so-called “pink tide” and a wide range of social movements opposing their extractive economic agendas and highly personalist (mostly male-dominated) political regimes. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, Gutiérrez (2015) argues that these features also signal spaces for hope grounded in our ability to (re)create non-patriarchal, non-colonial, non-capitalist communities. As I try to show, the right to the city and the new municipalist movements from Mexico City, Barcelona and beyond share similar goals and commitments. Relatedly, my research engages these and other decolonial contributions (such as Conway & Singh, 2011; Rojas, 2007, 2016; Santos, 2004, 2008, 2019; Tomiak, 2011, 2016, 2017) to identify crucial absences and point out both possibilities and limitations for dialogues and collaborations across initiatives/regions.

(Urban) commons for social reproduction

Recent decades have also been an incredibly fertile ground for both academic discussion and practical experimentation around the commons. From the revival and enlargement of “enclosures” in new waves of dispossession, private appropriation and the exploitation of

¹¹ See Kipfer (2018) for a different but somehow related discussion from a Canadian context, based on both contributions and omissions from Lefebvre and critical urban research.

nature, people, culture, social protection and more (Federici, 2012, 2013; Federici & Caffentzis, 2019; Harvey, 2011, 2012) to the identification and support of multiples resistances and initiatives to protect, re-signify and (re)create material and symbolic collective goods, the commons have become a powerful and ever-expanding theoretical and political agenda.¹² Many of its most substantial contributions are linked to the struggles of Indigenous Peoples, *campesinxs* and rural communities fiercely defending their lands, forests and waters against powerful corporate actors supported by often corrupt regimes.

The interest in the urban commons seems more recent and still limited, but certainly growing (Deleixhe, 2018; Dellenbaugh, Kip, Bieniok, Müller & Schwegmann, 2015; Duru, 2018; Enright & Rossi, 2018; Huron, 2015). From community gardens, parks and other public spaces to infrastructure, basic services and affordable housing, urban social movements and scholars alike have been denouncing and resisting the devastating effects of gentrification and privatization under neoliberal globalization. Although some authors have combined this approach either with the right to the city (Castro-Coma & Martí-Costa, 2016) or the new municipalism (Blanco, Gomà & Subirats, 2018; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017; Thompson, 2020), there seem to be few authors that have put the three into conversation. As described in the previous pages, my research attempts to contribute to filling this gap. In fact, I would argue that the (urban) commons can be better understood in all its transformative potential when combined with the postulates and actions of right to the city and the new municipalist movements. Once again, Barcelona and Mexico City provide

¹² According to Duru (2018) this concept “refers to shared places, communal property, or things that cannot be appropriated”, and usually encompassed one or a combination of three different categories: natural resources (air, water, soil, forests, and seeds); urban areas (roads, streets, parks, squares, and coasts); and social and cultural values (science, internet, arts, languages, and traditions) (Duru, 2018, p. 11). Also addressing its complexities and nuances, Castro-Coma and Martí-Costa (2016) point out to the ambiguity of some concepts associated with the commons (commonwealth, common good, public good, public property, etc.) and the debates around its most suitable/adequate translation in Spanish (Castro-Coma and Martí-Costa, 2016, p. 132).

fruitful sites for this exploration, along with some additional references to examples from other cities and global networks, as appropriate.

Departing from a critical engagement with Hardin's (1968) and Ostrom's (1990) classic discussion of the "tragedy" and the "governance" of the commons, Harvey (2012) provides important insights on the potential and limitations of the urban commons under contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Building on the work of Bookchin and Rancière, he stresses their "contradictory and therefore always contested" nature, bringing to the forefront the inevitable and difficult questions of whose common interests we want to protect, and through which means (Harvey, 2012, p. 71). Understanding the political nature of the commons and the common nature of the political as inseparable by definition, the commons is not a thing but a social relation between groups that are in fact not predetermined or static but dynamic in their self-definition and interests. Harvey (2012) then elaborates another set of relevant questions around the challenges the commons face at different scales (neighbourhood, city, metropolitan, global) and the tensions/relations with the "local state". Building on those important reflections, my research seeks to also reveal some of their shortcomings and bring into conversation some relevant feminist and decolonial, theoretical and political contributions from within and beyond academia (particularly in Chapters three and four).

The work of feminist scholars/activists regarding non-state centric and non-capitalocentric perspectives is crucial to exploring the relevance of *commoning* practices and expanding the horizons of the diverse, non-market economies taking place around the world in urban and rural areas (Federici, 2012, 2013; Federici & Caffentzis, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Gibson, Cameron & Healy, 2016; Quiroga Díaz & Gago, 2014). As a

departure point, the process of “new enclosures” and privatization that neoliberal globalization entails, has made clear for these authors that forms of social cooperation and communal property have not only not disappeared but are being constantly (re)created. From land, water, and forests, to agriculture, care, credit, or internet,¹³ they see a burgeoning spectrum of both resistance and alternatives in which women’s struggles play a prominent role. But these feminist insights go even further, highlighting the centrality of reproductive labour as the cornerstone from which society as a whole is in fact organized and therefore from which it should be analyzed, while at the same time providing a concrete platform with which to challenge and overcome the artificial (and exploitative) personal/political, private/public, market/state divides.

Understanding the commons primarily as social relations and not as things, Federici and Caffentzis (2019) identify the following as their main characteristics contributing to long-term emancipatory transformation: autonomous spaces, committed to overcome social divisions and inequalities, and where skills for self-government can be developed; shared property (natural or social wealth) that guarantees equal access to the means of (re)production, without hierarchies; social cooperation, relations of reciprocity and shared responsibility, based on established regulation; collective decision-making through diverse forms of direct democracy (i.e. assemblies and others). According to these authors, these features also “differentiate the *commons* from the *public*, which is owned, managed, controlled and regulated by and for the state” (Federici, 2013, p. 96)—a distinction with

¹³ The most relevant critiques that Federici makes to Hardt and Negri’s work (in *Empire*, *Multitude* and *Commonwealth*) are precisely linked with the fact that they omit any reference to both everyday life reproduction, and the material base that makes possible the digital technology, seen by them as an emergent “common space” that challenges and potentially overcomes the rules of inclusion/exclusion, access and use of the many resources available online (Federici, 2013, p. 250).

critical theoretical and political implications, as the work of Gutiérrez Aguilar (2015) also shows.¹⁴

In the vision of these scholars-activists, asserting and strengthening the commons is the only way to enlarge the spaces of autonomy, detaching production, distribution, and consumption practices from capitalist accumulation dynamics, and rejecting the perverse logic by which the social reproduction of some has to be satisfied at the expense of others and of the environment. I argue that similar concerns are behind some of the key political-economic questions that both right to the city and new municipalist movements are asking and trying to answer, both in the global South and in the global North, bringing to the forefront the socio-metabolic conditions that are necessary for our daily (re)production and making visible the multilayered and often exploitative rural-urban relations. Where is the water we are drinking in urban areas coming from? Are Indigenous Peoples and/or traditional communities from the larger region being negatively affected as a direct consequence? And where is the food we eat being cultivated? Who produces it, in whose lands, and under which labour conditions? Where does the urban waste end up and who is taking care of collecting it and recycling it? These kinds of questions signal how my project also engages with feminist authors working with social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2016; Giardini & Simone, 2015; Hall 2016), arguing that a stronger connection with the right to the city, new municipalist and commons approaches would expand and multiply its explanatory and transformative potential.

On a related note, Gibson-Graham's (2008) commitment to promote a "performative-ontological project" able to give visibility and make room for diverse

¹⁴ For additional analysis on the commons and the overlapping with the right to the city see Harvey (2012) and Castro-Coma and Martí-Costa (2016).

economies brings in a multitude of already existing possibilities aligned with the ones my research intends to explore. Taking inspiration and building on Santos (2004) “sociology of absences” and questioning the “monoculture of capitalist productivity”, they focus on so-called “marginal” economic practices and forms of enterprise. Their analysis shows how non-market and unpaid care labour¹⁵ (of humans and of the environment), cooperatives and co-housing initiatives, fair trade and social economy networks represent in fact more hours and more value produced than the capitalist sector and have potentially “more impact on social well-being” (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 617).¹⁶ Although without providing many details, the authors also mention slum-dwelling, squatting and other often ignored, marginalized and criminalized practices as part of the economic activities that could be included in their list. Here is where the right to the city movement may also have relevant theoretical, methodological, and political contributions to make. International civil society networks such as Habitat International Coalition (HIC) and Women in Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)¹⁷ have been working for the past several decades on supporting, documenting, and theorizing grassroots initiatives around self-build housing and neighbourhoods, food production, domestic work, streets vending and waste picking and recycling. Analyzing social actors’ strategies and logics behind these processes, as well as their potentialities and the wide range of challenges they face, these networks have given visibility to the realities and knowledge of traditionally excluded and marginalized groups, impacting public debate and policies. As explained, my inquiry takes a closer look at some

¹⁵ As a concrete example, Gibson-Graham (2008) quote Ironmonger (1996) to stress that “[o]ver the past 20 years, feminist analysts have demonstrated that non-market transactions and unpaid household work (by definition non-capitalist) constitute 30-50% of economic activity in both rich and poor countries” (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 615).

¹⁶ A similar analysis can be found in Mies (2007).

¹⁷ More information at <https://www.hic-net.org/> and <https://www.wiego.org/>

of these relevant actors, spaces, dynamics, and the collective narratives and practices they are producing in order to explore explicit and implicit linkages with the new municipalist movement, and the contributions they are together making to expand the politics of the commons.

Additionally, the perspective on the commons presented by Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen (2001) offers several concrete elements that, as the following chapters show, connect with both the right to the city and the neomunicipalist agendas in Mexico City, Barcelona and beyond. These include the defence of public space and the reaffirmation of the crucial principles of reciprocity, decentralization, regionalization, and localization. In other words, a focus on “policy from below” that highlights the “multiplicity of communities” and “ways of realizing a community” based on a moral economy (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001, p. 1022). My consideration of further decolonial, anti-racist and anti-capitalist approaches—including those put forward by Coulthard (2014), Daigle & Ramírez (2019), Tuck & Yang (2012) or Bledsoe, McCreary & Wright (2020)—signal some tensions and problematic gaps in initiatives trying to reclaim and advance the urban commons. In particular, Chapter four identifies the need for a more substantive engagement with Indigenous Peoples’ rights and philosophies to explicitly confront crucial issues such as the “racial regimes of ownership” (Bhandar, 2018) and “racialized dichotomies” (Tomiak, 2017) that artificially separate and classify peoples and places in order to control and exploit them. Using the breadth of this conceptual literature, I now turn to my analysis.

Chapter 2: The right to the city: Social movements expanding narratives and practices from Mexico City –and beyond

This chapter explores the multiple ways in which social movements have been expanding the narratives and practices related to the right to the city, locally and internationally, making significant conceptual and political contributions —something that in my opinion is so far unevenly reflected in the academic literature. My main argument is that many of the elements of what Lefebvre was visualizing as a potentially transformative, future-oriented urban proposal, were in fact already visible in the self-built neighbourhoods of the Latin American context. Viewed in a broader historical and geographical framework, struggles for the right to the city are presented as assuming alternative but connected names (such as urban reform, the social production of habitat and *poder popular*) that put forward a territorial approach and explicit linkages with *campesinxs* and Indigenous Peoples' claims.

Mexico City is taken as a grounding site for providing a detailed outline of some of the most relevant actors, contents and outcomes of social mobilization and advocacy efforts revolving around this topic, with a particular focus on the processes linked to the formulation of the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City (2010) over the past two decades. The subsections of this chapter include broader temporal and spatial references in order to provide a more detailed framework to better understand the contributions and challenges arising from this experience. In the subsequent analysis, I also signal relevant limitations as well as important connections with other chapters in this thesis.

The interconnected struggles for socio-spatial justice and democratization in Mexico and Latin America

What was at stake were not only the terrible material conditions of everyday existence and reproduction, but also the basic democratic liberties of association, expression, and representation, altogether with the right to the city (Massolo, 1992, p. 19).¹⁸

The struggles for socio-spatial justice and democratization certainly have a long history in Mexico, and it is widely recognized that urban popular movements have played a major role in pushing both forward in the capital city and beyond (Haber, 2009; Moctezuma Barragán, 2012; Ramírez Zaragoza, 2013). As in the case of many other Latin American countries, between the 1950s and 1980s an accelerated but concentrated, state-promoted process of industrialization (known as Import Substitution Industrialization), paired with land-based conflicts and lack of support for small scale, family-based, subsistence agriculture produced massive waves of internal migration of former *campesinxs* and Indigenous Peoples to the region's major cities, including Mexico City.¹⁹ Although differentiated by varying characteristics and dynamics across countries, economic development and job opportunities were in general limited, creating vast numbers of marginalized populations living in very precarious conditions (Connolly, 2014; Hardoy & Moreno, 1972; Quijano, 1968). At the same time, the urbanization process was not accompanied by adequate or sufficient land and housing policies, resulting in wide-spread squatting and self-building practices, usually —but not only— on the expanding periphery of cities.

¹⁸ My translation of the original Spanish version: “Lo que estaba en juego no eran solamente las pésimas condiciones materiales de la existencia y reproducción cotidianas, sino las elementales libertades democráticas de asociación, expresión y representación, junto con el derecho a la ciudad.” (Massolo, 1992, p. 19).

¹⁹ According to official data, between 1950 and 1990 the urban population in Latin America and the Caribbean rose from 70 to 315 million, while rural population went from 99 to 131 million (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019, Table I.8, pág. 25.). Considering the 1950-2004 period, some major metropolitan areas increased their population ten times or more (see Davis, 2006, Figure 2, p. 4).

Image 1: *Barrios populares* in Medellín, Colombia

Source: Lorena Zárate, 2019.

Over time, persistent mutual aid networks and community organizing allowed for the construction and consolidation of entire neighbourhoods, that today make up considerable portions of the urban landscape (Images 1 and 2). The mobilization of a wide range of resources, including support from alliances with students, professionals, left-wing and progressive political groups and parties, and in many cases also faith-based institutions/actors (in particular from the catholic church through the *comunidades eclesiales de base*), was key to the creation of these *colonias populares*.²⁰ The gradual

²⁰ In Latin America, *favelas*, *villas miseria*, *campamentos*, *tugurios* and many other names are typically used to refer to such impoverished neighbourhoods, usually translated in English as squatter settlements, shacks or slums. It is important to note that they are far from being identical in their characteristics, including the way people access land, the quality of

construction of housing and the piecemeal introduction of services required in fact a complex process —conceptualized as the “social production of habitat”— that often included both confrontation and negotiation with public and private actors.²¹ Although rarely reflected in leadership positions at the time, women were (and still are) not only the majority of participants but also played a central role in making these organizing and advocacy processes possible (García Vázquez, 2014; Massolo 1992).²² Beyond the particular elements and complicated dynamics of each *barrio*, the vicious cycle of socio-economic marginalization, spatial segregation, and political persecution and repression was evident for all of the movements engaged in these urban struggles, leading to the formulation of sophisticated and well-articulated agendas that combined both pragmatic and utopian elements ranging from the concrete improvement of living conditions to the more radical transformation of society and power relations. At the core of many of the initiatives leading to the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City (2010) are explicit commitments towards the construction of socio-political autonomy and *poder popular*, with a strong territorial approach —both in terms of self-determination and in recognizing material and symbolic linkages between peoples and places beyond rural-urban artificial divides.

housing and basic services, and the security of tenure. According to UN-Habitat (2020, Figure 1.5, p. 26), one third of the global urban population lacks adequate living conditions in the world today, with significant differences depending on the regions (from more than 60% in South-Saharan African countries to 10% in the global North).

²¹ Habitat International Coalition members have identified these as organized processes of collective construction and management of housing and neighbourhood infrastructures and facilities (including roads, water and electricity, schools, health clinics and community centres) that prioritize use-value over profit and private accumulation. For publications containing multiple case studies from across different regions, as well as theoretical developments and policy recommendations see Díaz & Ortiz Flores (2018), Ortiz Flores & Zárate (2002, 2005). A policy brief based on a case study from Nairobi is available at https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/development/sites/bartlett/files/pb_v31_0.pdf; the “generative pedagogies” related to the social production of habitat have also been recently analyzed as part of schools of “grassroots urbanism” in Latin America (Wesely, Allen, Zárate and Emanuelli, 2021).

²² Formally recognized with the organization of the First Women National Forum of the *Movimiento Urbano Popular* in 1983, where discussions of *popular feminism* were already underway (Espinoza Damián, 1992, p. 39).

Image 2: *Colonia popular* in Mexico City

Source: Jill Wagle, 2007. Used with permission.

Note: Once a peripheral self-built settlement, *Copilco El Bajo* is now a central neighbourhood in Coyoacán.

Furthermore, there is clear evidence (see Hardoy & Moreno, 1972) that the principles of urban reform were not only being discussed but, to some extent, also implemented in Latin America several years before the publication of Lefebvre's work on the right to the city (1968/1996) and the *urban revolution* (1970/2003).²³ In the well-known context of rapid urban growth and increasing spatial segregation, with socio-economic marginalization threatening political stability, Hardoy and Moreno (1972) point out the need for a complementary approach between agrarian and urban reform —acknowledging the limitations in the implementation of the former and the by then still reduced discussions about the latter. Analyzing the normative reforms introduced since the mid-1950s and early 1960s in countries such as Bolivia and Cuba, as well as the debates taking place in Colombia and the conditions for potential changes in Venezuela, they highlight a clear and radical agenda not just for the improvement of living conditions but also for the redistribution of economic and political power, articulating social justice concerns with the need for increased, substantive citizen participation in decision-making. Indeed, crucial elements that would reappear, decades later, in the City Statute in Brazil (2001), the World Charter for the Right to the City (2005) and the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City (2010) were already present in the cases analyzed by Hardoy and Moreno (1972). These include at least the following elements of what was then called “urban reform”: the centrality of land and tenure systems; the social function of land against speculation; and a set of mechanisms including expropriation (paid with public bonds), progressive taxation

²³ Lefebvre visited Peru and the *favelas* of Brazil in 1972 (and perhaps other Latin American countries afterwards), where he “became aware of how intense that social life is and how there might be a possibility for what he calls ‘the urban’...” (Marie Huchzermeyer, as interviewed by Omena De Melo, 2017, p. 367). As discussed in this thesis, back then social movements in the region were already putting forward initiatives around what would become crucial concepts for Lefebvre's understanding of the right to the city, including: praxis, *autogestion*, inhabiting, appropriation (as occupation and prevalence of the use value) and participation.

of empty or unused land/buildings, rental housing regulation and the regularization of self-built neighbourhoods.

Similarly revealing is the analysis made by Janssen (1978) of what could be considered as a clear expression of an urban social movement in Bogotá, Colombia, at the beginning of the 1970s. Back then, the announcement of a comprehensive urban development plan —financed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB)— that included the construction of a highway cutting through a large number of low income neighbourhoods in the eastern zone of the city,²⁴ sparked a massive social movement that mobilized thirty-two *barrios* and support from other popular organizations (articulating the peasant's movement, independent unions as well as students and radical religious leaders) to confront and ultimately provoke the collapse of the project. The *Llamado de Unidad* (Call for Unity) issued by the *Unión de los Comités Pro Defensa de los Barrios Orientales* (Union of the Committees in Defence of the Eastern Neighbourhoods) in July 1973 is worth quoting at length here, for it condenses their insights, claims and proposals in a striking way:

Some years ago, they expelled us with *La Violencia* [the civil war from 1948 to 1958] from the countryside, stealing our land. And now they want to chase us away from our barrios... with violence, with decrees of expropriation and with the highway. They want to drive us out of the city with urban development plans: a city that is being constructed by our labour and which moves days and night thanks to our efforts. We don't even have a right to the city! We demand that they let us live in the communities where we live... that they ask us our opinions about what they want to do with us. And especially that the unnecessary and wasteful highway should not be built because for us it means expulsion, more poverty and slavery (Janssen, 1978, p. 153).

²⁴ The author describes a wide range of *barrios* in the eastern zone of the city, composed of “invasions, pirate settlements, old, deteriorated slums predominantly occupied by tenants, decayed working-class neighbourhoods” and squatters’ settlements without property titles. By the mid 1970s, they all lacked access to services and the socio-economic level of their inhabitants was “well below the city’s average” (Janssen, 1978, footnote 6, p. 149).

In this case, reference to the right to the city²⁵ is already indicative/symptomatic of a deep understanding of the multilayered struggle for redistribution of material and political power: for these groups, claiming the right to be part of the physical urban setting is necessarily linked with the right to be considered full citizens participating in the decision-making process affecting their lives and the places they live in. Building on Castells's work, Janssen (1978) sees barrios as a "particular form of the class struggle based on the residential areas where consumption [in a broad sense, including not only commodities but social goods and services] and reproduction of the labour force occurs (...) and may temporarily become the principal form of class struggle in the cities" (p. 159). Under this framework, the shared experience of resistance to guarantee the appropriation, use and structuring of the urban space becomes a key factor for territorially based political identities and common agendas.

A People's City, a People's Charter

In Mexico, decades of authoritarian rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI), with governments "elected" under fraudulent conditions and corruption, together with increasing authoritarianism and institutional violence, made demands for rights and democracy inevitable and highly visible, especially in the capital. Even without an explicit dictatorship (as was the case in several other Latin American countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay), Mexico's "dirty war" was in full motion, with bloody episodes like the infamous student repression

²⁵ Interestingly, Janssen does not include any explicit mentions to the work of Henri Lefebvre on the right to the city, nor it is clear that the organizers were aware of it either. However, and given the fact that Lefebvre's book on the right to the city was translated into Spanish as early as 1969 and circulating within left-wing groups, there is a probability that some members of this movement had heard about it when drafting their demands.

and killings of 1968 and 1971 in Mexico City.²⁶ Some years later, the spontaneous and rich social organizing that took place after the deadly 1985 earthquake (showing extraordinary solidarity and claiming the right to stay in the central neighbourhoods and not to be displaced to the periphery), as well as the likely victory of the opposition candidate in the 1988²⁷ national elections, were all clear signs of serious cracks in the system of political rule and the fact that the conditions were ripe for substantive political transformation.

As a response to social pressures, some institutional changes introduced in the late 1980 and 1990s²⁸ made possible the first democratically elected government in the capital city (as a Federal District, it was the President who previously appointed a regent for the city). Since then, it can be said that centre-left agendas have dominated the local political landscape, expanding social policy and citizen participation in local affairs.²⁹ First under the Party of the Democratic Revolution (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*, or PRD) and more recently under the National Regeneration Movement (*Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional*, MORENA), over the past two decades progressive initiatives from social movements and civil society organizations have been translated into normative

²⁶ Only in 2019, President López Obrador released the archives of previously undisclosed information, recognizing the abuses of the authoritarian regime, issuing an official apology to the victims and promising justice and compensation. Paradoxically, he has also strengthened the presence and power of the military forces in Mexico, not just in relation to internal security concerns and the “war against drugs” but in infrastructure projects and operations (like the new international airport at the Santa Lucía military base in Zumpango, currently under construction in the northern part of Mexico City metropolitan area).

²⁷ Long-standing accusations of fraud were finally accepted some years ago by the PRI, in its attempt to prevent a victory by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas from the National Democratic Front (Frente Democrático Nacional), direct predecessor of the PRD.

²⁸ According to Sánchez Rodríguez (2016), from 1987 to 1996 three main reforms created first a local representative assembly and later a congress, while also transforming the city legal status and introducing the possibility of direct elections for mayor. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was in fact the first ever elected Mexico City Mayor in 1997. A broader historical perspective reveals that in fact there were municipal governments until 1928, when they were converted in “sub-districts” and incorporated in the Department of the Federal District (Massolo, 1992, p. 23).

²⁹ Although in a political economic context of neoliberal globalization, gentrification, and entrepreneurial urban governance, resulting in highly contradictory agendas around the key principles of “equity, sustainability and competitiveness” such as under the government of Ebrard Casaubón (2006-2012) (Adler, 2015; Gerlofs, 2020; Wigle, 2020).

and policy changes regarding a broad range of issues —although spatially selective and uneven, as Wagle (2020) points out. Some of the most relevant ones include: housing and neighbourhood upgrading programs;³⁰ improvements to urban mobility; childcare and economic support for single mothers, students, and the elderly; recognition and support for women's sexual and reproductive rights; Indigenous Peoples' and LGBTQ rights. Additionally, relevant modifications in the Participation Law expanded the scope of citizen involvement in public policy and budget allocations, with a particular emphasis on the collective political rights of Indigenous Peoples and *pueblos originarios*.

The signing of the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City (MCCRC)³¹, in July 2010, represented a fundamental milestone for activists, politicians and scholars alike (Adler, 2015; Gerlofs, 2020; Ramírez Zaragoza, 2013; Sánchez Rodríguez, 2016). By no coincidence, that year marked the 100th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution and the 200th anniversary of Mexican Independence, two of the most prominent socio-political events in the history of the country, with undoubtedly multiple material and symbolic repercussions to the present day. Indeed, I can attest to the fact that the promoters of this Charter were well aware of that, framing this effort as part of a broader struggle for necessary updates in the political and administrative arrangements of what was at the time

³⁰ Including the Housing Improvement Program (*Programa de Mejoramiento de Vivienda*) and the Neighbourhood Improvement Community Program (*Programa Comunitario de Mejoramiento Barrial*) promoted by the social movements and civil society organizations. Within a decade, the first one provided more than 300,000 interest-free loans to improve housing conditions for lower-income households, and the second financed more than 2,000 projects in the most marginalized areas of the city. Source: presentation by the *Colectivo de Mejoramiento Barrial* at a virtual Seminar held in January 2021.

³¹ The English version of the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City is available at http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/Mexico_Charter_R2C_2010.pdf The original Spanish version can be accessed at https://hic-al.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CARTA_CIUDAD_2011-muestra.pdf

the Federal District of the nation.³² Three relevant topics were of particular concern in the making of the Charter: a) a better distribution of power and resources for the capital city within a federated and republican institutional framework (including executive, legislative and judiciary branches); b) a deepening of democratic mechanisms and participation inside the megalopolis (until then divided in sub-districts with limited autonomy); and, c) greater consideration of metropolitan dimensions and dynamics.³³ Furthermore, and despite its strictly local character, it can be argued that this document and the process that made it possible were inspired by, and in turn, inspired other national and international initiatives.

As this chapter shows, the elaboration and negotiation of the Mexico City Charter can be seen as the apogee of decades-long struggles, achievements and lessons learnt by urban social movements. At the same time, it signals the possibilities and challenges of transforming power relations, the distribution of wealth and advancing social justice from a socio-spatial perspective. Conceived mainly as a political and pedagogical instrument for networking and awareness-raising (not as a legal instrument), the Charter was also part of an explicitly broader goal: a Constitution for the city—that eventually also became a reality seven years later (on the 100th anniversary of the Mexican Constitution, again by no coincidence).³⁴

³² Located within the Mexico Valley, Mexico City is part of a vast metropolitan area of about 8,000 square kilometres integrated by sixteen sub-districts (now *Alcaldías*), and sixty-two municipalities from the State of Mexico and the State of Hidalgo.

³³ Including ecological challenges (water supply, air pollution, food production and waste disposal), socio-demographic needs (i.e., housing and transportation) and political-administrative arrangements.

³⁴ It is important to mention that the word “Charter” can be misleading, given that in English it carries some degree of legal connotation and in many cases is used as interchangeably with “Constitution”. In Spanish they represent two distinct kinds of instruments, with different legal implications. As discussed in this chapter, the Mexico City Constitution is a separate document that was approved in February 2017.

The initiative for the MCCRC came from two dozen grassroots organizations united under the Urban Popular Movement (*Movimiento Urbano Popular*, MUP), a key protagonist in the creation and mobilization of self-built neighbourhoods in both central and peripheral areas of the city since the 1970s and 1980s.³⁵ Covering a broad range of issues and representing thousands of low-income and marginalized city dwellers (such as street vendors, domestic workers, taxi drivers, tenants, Indigenous Peoples and *campesinas/os*), those organizations included the *Unión Popular Revolucionaria Emiliano Zapata* (UPREZ), the *Frente Popular Francisco Villa* (FPFV), the *Asamblea de Barrios* (AB) and the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores* (CUT), amongst others.³⁶

After dialogues between different groups in 2007, these and other organizations promoted a first public gathering to present and discuss the idea in the city's most iconic public/political space, *el Zócalo*, on the occasion of the World Social Forum in January 2008.³⁷ A few months later, following initial negotiations with local officials, a multi-sectoral drafting Committee (*Comité Promotor*) was announced, comprised by the MUP, the Federal District's Secretary of Government, the Human Rights Commission of the Federal District (CDHDF), the local Attorney General for Social Affairs, the Coalition of

³⁵ It is widely accepted that more than sixty percent of the residential areas of the city have been built by low-income families and communities (Connolly & Castro, 2016; Torres, 2006). A small but significant percentage of those are the result of organized efforts by social movements, often with the support of a wide range of actors (see references to "social production of habitat" on this chapter).

³⁶ Others included: Patria Nueva; Asamblea de Barrios de la Ciudad de México Santa María la Ribera; Unión de las Colonias Populares; Coordinadora de Organizaciones Sociales; Coordinadora Social y Vecinal (AZCATL. AC); Proyectos Populares Sociales A.C.; Vecinos de Justo Sierra y Correo Mayor A.C.; Asociación de Residentes Comerciales y Trabajadores de la Zona Alameda (ARCTZA A.C.); Fuerza Ciudadana de Organizaciones Independientes (FCOI); Frente Unido de las Organizaciones Sociales y Ciudadanas; Unión Popular Valle Gómez A.C.; Sociedad Organizada en Lucha; Frente de Lucha Inquilinaria Ricardo Flores Magón; Hogar del Ciudadano A.C.; Inquilinos Justo Sierra 40; Unión Popular Benita Galeana A.C.; Coordinadora de Cuartos de Azotea Tlatelolco – Unión de Cuartos de Azotea de Inquilinos (CCAT-UCAI); Comité de Lucha Popular; Barzón Ciudad de México.

³⁷ More details about this event and several related materials (including multimedia) available in Spanish at http://archivos.hic-al.org/eventosc31e.html?evento=573&id_categoria=4

Civil Society Organizations for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Espacio DESC), and the Habitat International Coalition-Latin American Office (HIC-AL).³⁸ Throughout 2008 and 2009, this committee was responsible for the coordination of the elaboration process for the Charter, organizing regular meetings, seminars and public consultations that involved thousands of people and dozens of institutions. It was also in charge of designing dissemination materials, communications tools and campaigns in order to facilitate both internal coordination and engagement with a wider audience, including activities with children and youth, feminist, LGBT+ and Indigenous Peoples' organizations, unions, academics and human rights activists.³⁹ A first draft of the Charter was presented for feedback at numerous events in Mexico City, and later discussed with an international audience in Rio de Janeiro (May 2010) at the Fifth World Urban Forum organized by UN-Habitat and the Ministry of Cities of Brazil under the motto, "Right to the City: Bridging the Urban Divide."⁴⁰

The collective nature of the process was also reflected on the very day of the Charter's signing on July 13, 2010. Held at the impressive Metropolitan Theatre, more than 2,000 attendees not only witnessed the official act presided over by Mexico City Mayor

³⁸ As coordinator of the HIC-AL team at the time, I had the opportunity to actively participate in this process. Enrique Ortiz Flores, my colleague/mentor and long-standing collaborator of the urban social movements in Mexico, was a key figure in the promotion of this initiative and in facilitating the drafting of the Charter. A few years later, he was also part of the civil society delegates working on the city's Constitution proposal.

³⁹ For a chronological account of the process and the documents linked to the development of the Charter see: <https://derechoalaciudaddf.blogspot.com/>

⁴⁰ The adoption of this title for the official forum was the result of the pressure and lobbying coming from national social movements and civil society organizations involved in right to the city struggles for decades (see details later in this chapter). At the same time, and with the support of international networks (including Habitat International Coalition), they promoted a parallel and well attended Social Urban Forum (as a thematic activity within the World Social Forum framework) that featured David Harvey, Peter Marcuse, and Raquel Rolnik within a programme of around 150 roundtables and workshops with over 3,500 participants. The year before, David Harvey was invited by these same actors to participate at the Urban Reform Tent inside the ninth edition of the World Social Forum in Belém do Pará, Brazil (http://archivos.hic-al.org/eventos88e6.html?evento=685&id_categoria=4), marking relevant south/north, academic/grassroots dialogues that would influence his book *Rebel Cities* (2012).

Marcelo Ebrard Casaubón⁴¹ and the Presidents of the City's Legislature and Justice Tribunal, together with selected representatives from social movements and civil society organizations. Upon exiting from the formal event, participants also added their signatures to the Charter along with hundreds of social, academic, professional and governmental institutions, including: Indigenous and peasant organizations (38), *ejidos and pueblos* (21), cooperatives (11), unions (7), transit associations (11), civil organizations (72), women's and feminist organizations (8), LGBTTI rights organizations (9), social organizations (41), small commerce organizations and public workers (13) and residents' organizations (12).⁴² In other words, the signing of the Charter represented a symbolically relevant moment that combined elements of both representative and direct democracy around a new political contract containing a shared vision and pathway forward based on the commitments of many different actors.

Pushing artificial boundaries through grounded contributions

In terms of its contents, the Mexico City Charter can also be seen as a critical contribution to the understanding of the right to the city as both a comprehensive vision for radical transformation and an action-oriented, practical agenda. From the onset, this instrument is explicitly “posed as a social response, counter to the city-as-merchandise, and as expression of the collective interest” (MCCRC, 2010, p. 4). Its promoters agree that the right to the city and this Charter aims to confront the most profound “causes and manifestations” of economic, social, territorial, cultural, political, and physiological

⁴¹ Currently the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, from the newly formed *Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional* (MORENA).

⁴² The complete list of signatures is available in the Spanish version only.

exclusion. To advance down this path, its three main objectives, as specified in its preamble, include general principles such as the “construction of an inclusive, livable, just, democratic, sustainable and enjoyable city”; and two critical dimensions linked to the promotion of social organization and active citizenship, as well as an “equitable and solidarity urban economy” that strengthens the popular sectors.⁴³ (MCCRC, 2010, p. 5). Viewed as a claim and as a commitment, “the Charter for the Right to the City conceives this right in a broad sense: it is not limited to defending human rights within one territory, but rather implies obligations assumed by authorities and responsibilities held by the population in the management, production, and development of the city” (MCCRC, 2010, p. 6).

It is important to note that, deliberately, this Charter does not reproduce the format of traditional legal instruments with long catalogues of specific thematic and sectorial rights and obligations (addressing particular issues and populations). Instead, it makes an explicit effort to grasp the multidimensional, overlapping and mutually constituted dimensions of the right to the city as a complex and collective right. According to this framework, its “strategic foundations” are connected with both “dreams” and concrete recommendations and commitments pertaining to a wide range of actors. In other words, not just *what* people want but also *for what* and *how* to get there. To fully grasp the relevance of its contributions, it is worthwhile to review some of these contents and the debates from which they emerge. Among several other sources,⁴⁴ significant inspiration

⁴³ Popular sectors understood as low-income, marginalized and living under vulnerable conditions.

⁴⁴ Including the European Charter on Women in Cities (1995), the European Charter for Human Rights in the City (2000), the Latin American Charter for Women’s Right to the City (2004) and the Montreal Charter on Rights and Responsibilities (2006).

and guidance for the elaboration and contents of the Mexico City Charter came from two previous processes and documents: Brazil's City Statute (2001), promoted by the National Forum of Urban Reform (Fernandes, 2007; Instituto Pólis, 2002) and the World Charter for the Right to the City (2005) developed through a collective effort that brought together social movements and international civil society organizations.⁴⁵ By putting the city's own socio-spatial and political trajectory (as explained in the previous sections) in conversation with some of the key elements of these and other local and international efforts, it can be argued that the MCCRC significantly expanded and clarified some of the critical dimensions to advance towards a right to the city conceived and enacted from the bottom-up.

From the World Assembly of Inhabitants (Mexico City, 2000)⁴⁶ came the main directions to outline "the city we want" based on six key words: democratic, inclusive, sustainable, productive, educational, and livable.⁴⁷ In the proposed matrix that organizes the contents of the Charter (Image 3) these dreams are cross-referenced with six strategic foundations ("how we are going to get there"). The first three of these came from both the Brazil's City Statute and the World Charter: full citizenship, linked with residence and the

⁴⁵ Some scholars have wrongfully referred to UN-Habitat and UNESCO as original promoters of this Charter when they were in fact interested but somehow reluctant supporters at different points during the process. A personal anecdote might be of interest to illustrate some of the tensions at play. In the halls of the World Urban Forum organized by UN-Habitat and the Canadian government in Vancouver in June 2006, UNESCO officials confidentially expressed to HIC representatives that the agency was receiving warnings from USA diplomats about potential withdrawal of financial support, should it continue to promote the vision of the right to the city put forward by social movements and international civil society organizations inspired by an alleged "communist"—as they portrayed Henri Lefebvre. It then came as no surprise that, a decade later, at the UN discussions around the elaboration of the New Urban Agenda (2016), the USA government was one of the key leading voices against the inclusion of the right to the city in that document.

⁴⁶ Promoted by the Habitat International Coalition and other international networks and social movements, it gathered more than 350 delegates representing dozens of grassroots organizations from 35 countries in all regions. The week-long agenda included a combination of debates, field-visits, peer exchanges and cultural activities, producing a series of documents with specific proposals around the key dimensions of the city as envisioned by the participants. I was hired by the HIC office in Mexico three months before this event to be part of the organizing team.

⁴⁷ Including specific subcomponents around safety in terms of both disasters and violence; health; social and cultural diversity.

exercise of human rights (and not to legal status); the social function of land, property, and the city (against speculation and evictions, and for regularizing self-built neighbourhoods); and the democratic management of the city (strengthening mechanisms for direct and community-based, not just representative democracy). The following three represent relevant additions made by the Mexico City Charter: the democratic production of the city and in the city (recognizing and supporting the right to produce the city and the social and solidarity economy); the sustainable and responsible management of the commons (including natural and cultural heritage) of the city and its surroundings (a territorial and ecological understanding beyond city administrative-political boundaries and centred on non-commodification); and the democratic and equitable enjoyment of the city (linked in particular with the cultural dimension and the essential, multiple roles of public spaces and infrastructures in supporting autonomy and difference).

Image 3: Matrix of contents of the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY A COLLECTIVE AND COMPLEX RIGHT							
The city we want (World Assembly of Urban Inhabitants)		Strategic foundations of the Right to the City
Full exercise of human rights	Social function of the city and of property	Democratic management of the city	Democratic production of the city and in the city	Sustainable and responsible management of commons and resources	Democratic and equitable enjoyment of the city
3.1 Democratic city		3.1.1	3.1.2	3.1.3	3.1.4	3.1.5	3.1.6
3.2 Inclusive city		3.2.1	3.2.2	3.2.3	3.2.4	3.2.5	3.2.6
3.3 Sustainable city		3.3.1	3.3.2	3.3.3	3.3.4	3.3.5	3.3.6
3.4 Productive city		3.4.1	3.4.2	3.4.3	3.4.4	3.4.5	3.4.6
3.5 Educational city		3.5.1	3.5.2	3.5.3	3.5.4	3.5.5	3.5.6
Livable city	3.6 Safe (from disasters)	3.6.1	3.6.2	3.6.3	3.6.4	3.6.5	3.6.6
	3.7 Secure (from violence)	3.7.1	3.7.2	3.7.3	3.7.4	3.7.5	3.7.6
	3.8 Healthy	3.8.1	3.8.2	3.8.3	3.8.4	3.8.5	3.8.6
	3.9 Convivial and culturally diverse	3.9.1	3.9.2	3.9.3	3.9.4	3.9.5	3.9.6
Strategic Indispensable support Complementary support	Strategic	City of rights	City for all	Politically participative city	Socially productive city	Viable and healthy city	Open, free and fun city
	Indispensable support Complementary support	Anticipated goals					

Source: Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City, 2010, p. 14.

At this point it is worth highlighting that, even if not explicitly mentioned, several of those elements clearly resonate with and enlarge the conceptualization of the right to the city developed by Henri Lefebvre.⁴⁸ At least four are evident at first sight: the city as collective *oeuvre*, strongly linked with the idea of *autogestión*; the social function of land (use value

⁴⁸ As several authors have highlighted, Lefebvre's conceptualization of the right to the city, uneven and dispersed among his prolific work, should in fact conceived as part of a broader theoretical commitment to provide a dialectical understanding of space as socially produced and productive, with its multiple social and political dimensions and repercussions.

over exchange value in its shortest formulation); the expanded, non-legalistic notion of citizenship (inhabitants, denizens); and the right to participate in the decision-making processes that affect the production of the city. Although not all equally developed or organically connected in Lefebvre's work, these elements could be seen as a strongly linked "ecosystem" and therefore taken in relation with one another to better grasp their implications. Moreover, each one represents a kind of necessary condition for the other, where the last three are in fact constitutive elements of the city as *oeuvre*. In other words, the social production of space is inextricably linked with the collective construction of citizenship, the social construction of rights and the radicalization of self-determination and democracy.

Building on Lefebvre's formulations and legacy, scholars have pointed out the peculiar nature of the right to the city as a non-conventional right, not to just to claim inclusion or access to what already exists but to radically transform it (city and society, as one integrated, inseparable whole). More specifically, they have described a right that is at the same time an opening and a commitment to profoundly question and overcome the commodification of all spheres of life under capitalist relations and the serious limitations of democracy under a western-liberal approach (Attoh, 2011; Gerlofs, 2020; Harvey, 2008, 2012; Purcell, 2003, 2013a, 2013b). In other words, Lefebvre's work is a lucid critique of the existing order as much as a wake-up call for consumers, beyond class and political party divisions. At the same time, his critical take on urbanism as functionalist and alienating under both capitalism and bureaucratic socialism, underscores that the right to the city and the possibility to build a different and dignified urban life would require a non-

fragmentary (disciplinary, sectorial) understanding of socio-spatial dynamics and a serious dialectical approach beyond binary conceptualizations.

Against this backdrop, I would contend that, to some extent, what Lefebvre imagined as a virtual reality (possible but not fully present yet) was already happening in many parts of Latin America, including Mexico. Going further, it is also possible to see how the characteristics of the urbanization process taking place in this region constituted the ground not only for political experimentation but also for conceptualizations and theorizing arising from the praxis of social movements (as another expression of the “epistemologies of the south” discussed by scholars like Santos, 2004, 2019). Within this context, it can be argued that the Mexico City Charter plays a kind of double strategic function. On the one hand, as mentioned before, it gives both more specific contents and orientations not just on *what* to do but also on *how* to do it (recognizing a multiplicity of actors, responsibilities, paths and options); and on the other, it expands some of its most critical dimensions and possibilities to overcome western-modern, hierarchical dichotomies including the rural/urban, private/public, formal/informal, legal/illegal, productive/reproductive and local/global artificial divides. As explored in the following chapters, many of these elements are also crucial to the propositions of the so-called new municipalism and the urban commons movements.

Fundamentally, I sustain that the notion of the right to the city included in the MCCRC incorporates a territorial (and not just spatial) perspective informed by Indigenous millenary world-visions and practices still present in Mexico and beyond.⁴⁹ In fact, many

⁴⁹ The *altépetl* in Nahua (central Mexico) and *ayllu* (Quechua and Aymara in the Andes region) are crucial terms to define both place and people that live in it, something also found in the Spanish word *pueblo*. Organized around subsistence needs, they are based on reciprocity and autonomous governance models, in an entangled web of material,

urban social movements, including MUP, have adopted broader slogans such as the “right to the city and to habitat” or the “right to the city and to territory” (see also Chapter four).⁵⁰ This reflects a differentiated and enriched ontological approach with relevant ethical and political implications. First and foremost, it signals an understanding of the socio-ecological dimensions of everyday interactions (human and more-than-human), together with the imperative to see them and treat them as part of a commons that should not be commodified and instead been collectively taken care of. Additionally, it functions as a reminder of long-standing governance and self-determination mechanisms that predate, complicate, and contest the contemporary political-administrative arrangements and boundaries attached to the modern, (neo)liberal state and city government.

Consequently, and given the metropolitan nature of Mexico City as one of the world's biggest megacities,⁵¹ the notion of citizenship based on local inhabitation and not in national legal status is re-taken and expanded. This is the result of explicit discussions (within the promoting committee and beyond) about the need to include not only residents inside the Federal District but also the millions more that inhabit the surrounding states that compose the metropolitan area and that commute (several hours) daily to work, study, shop or access education, health, and recreation activities in the more central and better-serviced area of the megalopolis. In other words, a definition of citizenship that is based neither on place of

political and spiritual relations among humans and between humans and more-than-human beings. On the relevance of territory for rural and urban social struggles in Latin America see, among many others, the work of Escobar (2008, 2018), Gutiérrez Aguilar (2015) and Zibechi (2008). Similar references analyzing practices and land-bounded world-visions of Indigenous Peoples in North America can be found in Coulthard (2014), Coulthard & Simpson (2016), Tomiak et al. (2019) and Tuck & Yang (2012). It is important to note that in the Anglo literature the word “land” is often preferred, given the (modern) identification of territory with state sovereignty (Agnew, 2009; Brenner, 2009).

⁵⁰ For recent examples from Argentina and Chile see <https://www.ciscsa.org.ar/iv-mujeres-y-ciudades-2021> and <https://www.derechoyterritorio.com/>.

⁵¹ According to the most recent global report by UN-Habitat (2020), the Metropolitan Area of the Mexico City Valley (*Zona Metropolitana del Valle de México*) is one of the largest mega-regions in the world, comprising 24.5 million inhabitants (UN-Habitat, 2020, Table 3.3., p. 93).

birth (nationality) or place of residence, but on the spatial dimensions of everyday individual and collective needs and social interactions. Furthermore, and linked to the historical-territorial approach, both the Charter (2010) and later the Constitution (2017) recognize the material, political and cultural rights of Indigenous people's living in the Mexico City Valley, both as *pueblos y barrios originarios* dating from before the Spanish conquest (1521) and/or the establishment of the Mexican state (1810), as well as those Indigenous communities now residing in the city.

It is important to highlight that not only Mexican but more generally global South perspectives are reflected in the idea of the city as *oeuvre* and the production of space more specifically linked to the conceptualization of the social production of habitat (not just housing but neighbourhoods, in urban and rural settings) arising from the characteristics of the urbanization process in Latin America and other regions. Back in the 1970s, detailed observations and critical analysis of the rapid growth of the self-built, low-income peripheries in Lima, Athens or Nairobi were the basis for parallel elaborations around the “housing as a verb” and “freedom to build” premises (Turner, 1972). In the following decades, civil society networks such as the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) would focus on documenting a rich body of experimentations and producing theoretical reflections that have both strengthened autonomous practices and influenced public policy in different countries—that, in turn, have supported these practices. Importantly, as several authors have pointed out, the relevance of these processes goes clearly beyond the material dimensions to include socio-political ones, in a circle that connects back to the definition of citizenship (Holston, 1995, 2019; Ortiz Flores & Zárate, 2005; Purcell, 2013a).

The long and winding roads: the legacy and challenges of the Mexico City Charter

The right to the city is, therefore, only ever partly remade, since it always contains meaning that has been sedimented over the course of a long history of cries and demands. (Purcell, 2013b, p. 566)

As stated above, since its very inception the promoters of the Mexico City Charter had in mind a multidimensional strategy that included three main components: 1) awareness raising and *ad hoc* training (both of general population and, more significantly, of public officials and institutions); 2) adjustments to the legal framework; 3) the City's first ever Constitution. To a greater or lesser extent, what came after its signature and the several repercussions the process and contents had were part of that explicit and intentional path. In the subsequent months and years, a multitude of different actors, well beyond the original drafting committee, took up and carried on the challenging tasks, in a combination of common goals and flexibility that certainly had generative and multiplication effects. Besides further dissemination and dozens of capacity-building activities across the city, a detailed plan for ratification at the sub-district level was also put in place. In the context of municipal elections and constant changes in the political landscape, the promoters considered that this element was key to ensuring a continuation and renewed commitment from public authorities for the implementation of the right to the city. As a result, between December 2010 and June 2012, fifteen of the sixteen sub-districts in the city had formally signed the Charter, although very few re-took the work at that politico-spatial dimension and only one developed its own Charter due to the pressure from its very active low-income community.⁵²

⁵² Details of these processes are included in Ramírez Zaragoza's doctoral dissertation (2013).

In parallel, and clearly in line with a within, against, and beyond strategy, different organizations and communities used the Charter to claim their rights and denounce abuses from private and public actors, including the Mexico City government. Such was the well documented case with the construction of the *Supervía Poniente* (Western Superhighway), that prompted mobilizations and even legal complaints from a mixture of middle and low-income neighbours affected by destruction of their houses and its environmental impact, with support from academics and NGOs.⁵³ At the same time, pedestrians and biking activists also cited the Charter and its contents as a central reference for claiming the “right to mobility”, now not only included in the Mexico City Constitution (see below) but inspiring similar advocacy efforts and legal change across several provinces in Mexico.

Finally, the Mexico City Constitution⁵⁴ was enacted and officially presented on February 5, 2017, by Mayor Miguel Ángel Mancera (2012-2018) —again by no coincidence, on the very day of the 100th anniversary of Mexico’s Constitution, renowned as the first in the world to incorporate social rights. Explicitly placed within that proud tradition, the Mexico City Constitution was conceived as one of “rights” and to this day remains as the only one that recognizes the right to the city at the local level.⁵⁵ It is relevant to mention that this inclusion goes beyond the specific mention and definition of the right

⁵³ For media repercussions about this case, see Mariana Suárez Esquivel, “La Supervía viola sistemáticamente derechos humanos de la comunidad” [The *Supervía* systematically violates the human rights of the community], *La Jornada*, July 29, 2012, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2012/07/29/capital/032n1cap>; Judith Amador Tello, “La Supervía: Violación al derecho a la ciudad” [The *Supervía* Highway: A Violation of the Right to the City], *Proceso Magazine*, September 12, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2sLJyJ7>.

⁵⁴ Available at http://www.infodf.org.mx/documentospdf/constitucion_cdmx/Constitucion_%20Politica_CDMX.pdf.

⁵⁵ The right to the city is explicitly mentioned in the National Constitutions of Ecuador (2008), with a definition coming also from the World Charter on the Right to the City (2005).

to the city (article 12),⁵⁶ given that the contents of the Mexico City Charter can be found throughout the Constitution. Examples of this include references to the social function of the city as one of its three main guiding principles (art. 3.c); the democratic (art. 7), educational (art. 8), solidarity (art. 9), productive (art. 10), inclusive (art. 11), liveable (art. 13) and safe (art. 14) city; the direct (art. 25) and participatory (art. 26) democracy (beyond representative democracy, art. 27); and the enhanced collective rights and recognition of self-government mechanisms for traditional towns and Indigenous Peoples in the city (arts. 57-59).

At the same time, and building on the claims and possibilities opened by the Mexico City Charter, the Mexico City Constitution incorporates new social rights, such as: the right to public space, as collective and participatory commons that serve political, social, educational, cultural, and recreational functions (art. 13.D); the right to mobility, regarding access to an integrated multimodal and sustainable public transportation system, the protection of pedestrians and the prioritization of the non-motorized options (art. 13.E); the right to free time, as a fundamental element for well-being, allowing inhabitants to enjoy rest, leisure, social, and recreational activities, as well as look after their personal care (art. 13.F). Most probably taking inspiration from the National Constitutions of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009), the Mexico City Constitution also incorporates the notion of nature as a collective entity with its own rights—and instructs the subsequent elaboration of an *ad hoc* regulatory law (art. 13.A). Furthermore, the new Constitution also creates several critical institutions for the city, including an Integral Human Rights System and a

⁵⁶ The definition of this right comes directly from the Mexico City Charter, highlighting that the right to the city should guarantee “the full exercise of human rights, the social function of the city and its democratic management, assuring territorial justice, social inclusion and equitable distribution of public goods with citizen participation” (article 12).

Democratic and Prospective Planning Institute and System (that should be linked to each other and incorporate substantive citizen's participation), a local Congress, an Economic, Social and Environmental Council and the possibility to determine municipalities within its territory (former sub-districts, with limited power, attributions and democratic mechanisms, are now stronger *Alcaldías*).

But the impacts of the Mexico City Charter can also be traced well beyond its boundaries to the international level. This includes as far away and disparate examples such as the Gwangju Guiding Principles for a Human Rights City (South Korea, 2014)⁵⁷ and the Right to the City Charter for Greater Beirut (Lebanon, 2018).⁵⁸ The former is linked to the Human Rights Cities movements and international forums and the latter to a collective process promoted by a combination of local and international civil society and local government networks, with an specific focus on the ongoing migration crisis in the region and the formulations of the “sanctuary cities”.⁵⁹ At the same time, several of the principles and proposals of the Mexico City Charter also made their way into international instruments containing both commitments by and orientations for local and national governments. Finally, in response to organized mobilization and advocacy efforts, the Global-Charter Agenda for Human Rights in the City (2011)⁶⁰ adopted by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG),⁶¹ as well as of the New Urban Agenda (2016)⁶² adopted

⁵⁷ Available at <https://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/Gwangju%20Guiding%20Principles%20for%20Human%20Rights%20City%20adopted%20-%202014.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Available at http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/Beirut_Charter_FINAL_EN.pdf.

⁵⁹ Also linked with the new municipalist movement. For a brief overview of the term and the political trajectory from “cities of sanctuary” to “solidarity cities” in the USA and Europe see Dieterich (2017).

⁶⁰ Available at <https://bit.ly/2l0JC3a>.

⁶¹ More information at <https://www.uclg.org/>.

⁶² Available at <http://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda>.

at the Third UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III, Quito, Ecuador, 2016) explicitly recognize the right to the city and many of its key elements.⁶³

Conclusions

To be clear, and as several activists and scholars have pointed out, the challenges for further advancing the implementation of these transformative legal frameworks remain undoubtedly considerable (Adler, 2015; Cymbalista, 2008; Fernandes, 2007; Gerlofs, 2020; Minuchin, 2019; Rodríguez Zaragoza, 2013; Sánchez Rodríguez, 2016). Social movements and marginalized communities know far too well that the formal recognition of rights (on paper) is certainly not enough to change reality. In fact, many contemporary trends are pointing in the opposite direction, with increasing inequality and socio-spatial segregation as a direct result of neoliberal policies based on a brutal combination of the accelerated financialization of land and housing and austerity measures (even in the context of a global COVID-19 pandemic). At the same time, decades of social mobilization and advocacy—including the conversion of several community leaders into high-ranking public officials—has highlighted the relevance of remaining alert and independent from governments and political parties. The sustained commitment to expose/oppose, imagine/propose, and politicize/experiment (as articulated by Marcuse and others) is certainly part of multi-sectoral and multi-scalar initiatives also inspired by the World

⁶³ Although with important limitations and contradictions, such as intentional omissions to any mentions of democracy, LGBTQ+ rights or the cities as commons, and notions of “sustained economic growth” that are clearly incompatible with serious ecological concerns and commitments.

Charter for the Right to the City, such as the Right to the City Alliance,⁶⁴ the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City⁶⁵ and the Global Platform for the Right to the City.⁶⁶

For their part, several academics have also recognized the need to go beyond the all-too-well studied and analyzed dynamics of capitalist relations and liberal governance mechanisms to identify and support multiple existing initiatives signaling that another world and another city are possible. However, and as this chapter has tried to illustrate, it seems to me that that literature has unevenly acknowledged the conceptual and political contributions arising from social movements. When speaking about the right to the city movements, it could be argued that they appear to be trapped in a kind of double invisibilization. On the one hand, authors from critical urban studies tend to perceive many of these initiatives as only focused on legalization/institutionalization, and therefore not only limited but in fact “reformist”, if not conservative and regressive. Unable to consider those efforts as an end-goal in and of itself, and, at the same time, as important elements inside a broader socio-political strategy, they are usually quick to sanction their failures in terms of not being able to provide a full, more or less immediate, transformation of society. On the other hand, certain activists, and scholars from critical legal studies (excluding urban law), arguably less familiar with the spatial dimensions of socio-political struggles, appear overly concerned with the risk of promoting a new collective right that seems too complex, too abstract or even redundant of what is already included in the legal frameworks.

⁶⁴ More information at <https://righttothecity.org/>.

⁶⁵ Available at <https://housingnotprofit.org/>.

⁶⁶ More information <https://www.right2city.org/>.

From critiques regarding a lack of clarity (Purcell, 2003) to the recognition of its “strategically fuzzy” character (Attoh, 2011), the right to the city has come a long way. Being a living paradigm, its specific features and imperatives will always depend on local historical-geographical conditions. The Mexico City process shows the relevant role of multi-sectoral and multi-scalar alliances in promoting an elaborated strategy that seeks to advance both concrete elements and the radical imaginative potential contained in the right to the city as a mobilizing and transformative agenda. Intentionally presented as a complex but flexible concept (that I later conceptualize as a narrative-in-practice), there is no doubt that it also suffers from important gaps and silences, exposing the need and the possibility to be strengthened by a stronger feminist, anti-racist and decolonial approach. The following chapters of this thesis address some of these issues and highlight additional limitations and potentialities, in particular when put into conversation with the contributions coming from the new municipalist and the (urban) commons movements.

Chapter 3: Barcelona as social laboratory: a feminist agenda to transform cities and politics through new municipalism and urban commons

Understanding the right to the city and the new municipalist movements as highly intertwined and complementary efforts, this chapter works from the social and political transformations advanced over the past decade in Barcelona and other places to outline important overlapping features (i.e. actors, narratives and practices), as well as the significant contributions that the latter brings to the current debates and experimentations around the (urban) commons and a feminist approach to social reproduction and politics. By analyzing examples of concrete initiatives and policies implemented by *Barcelona en Comú*, both inside and outside of municipal government, fundamental concepts such as caring cities, feminist urbanism and public-community partnerships come into focus. Despite their limitations, I contend that they can be seen as crucial avenues for materializing non-capitalistic and beyond state-centric alternatives by navigating the possibilities and tensions of collective strategies that move “inside” and “outside” of institutions.

Although not always reflected in the academic literature, it can be argued that social movements engaged in struggles for the right to the city and new municipalism have benefited from intentional processes of collective mobilizing and mutual learning. Additional efforts could also be put in place to foster more permanent and systematic spaces for dialogue and joint initiatives. Explicit and visible connections between these movements are multiple, and many have been recently documented by their protagonists,

scholars and organizations interested in these topics.⁶⁷ Implicit and less evident, but nevertheless representing salient shared elements and dynamics—including personal connections, shared political experiences and multi-scalar alliances and strategies—are no doubt relevant and should be considered in order to further the conversation about the potentials and limitations of these transformative agendas. Last but not least, a close reading of scholarly analysis reveals certain problematic tendencies in the differentiated way they seem to be addressing these related processes. The role of social movements in knowledge creation and the relationship between theoretical approaches and specific cases is one of the dimensions where the interpretative split becomes evident. Additionally, while new municipalist strategies of working within and beyond state institutions are favourably evaluated, similar approaches implemented by right to the city movements are instead presented as limited or even counterproductive.

What is the new municipalism? Why Barcelona?

Scholars writing about new municipalism⁶⁸ agree about its strong roots in the massive mobilizing and organizing that gave form to the *15M/Indignados* movements in Spain, inspired by the so-called Arab Spring across Northern Africa and the Middle East and, in turn, inspiring the *Occupy* movement in the USA and other countries in different regions. In the long aftermath of the 2007-2008 world financial and economic crisis that hit Spain

⁶⁷ See for example the work of Rubio-Pueyo (2019), Russell (2020) and Thompson (2020).

⁶⁸ Also referred to as “radical municipalism”, “municipalist confluences”, “municipalism of the common good” or “municipalism of the commons”, among other denominations.

in a particularly severe way,⁶⁹ between 2011 and 2015 streets and squares in cities of all sizes became (once again) the spaces that a wide range of activists and communities took over, not only for expressing profound discontent and opposition to neoliberal austerity measures⁷⁰ but also, and perhaps even more importantly, to reclaim and experiment with “real democracy” and socio-political alternatives. Profoundly disenchanted with traditional political parties, electoral dynamics and high levels of corruption, expressions of discontent were driven mostly by young people and supported by new communication technologies and increasingly accessible social media. In this context, and as one of the activists-analysts closely following and reflecting upon these processes in Spain, Rubio-Pueyo (2019) identifies the resurgence⁷¹ of municipalism as the second of three different political “hypotheses” put forward by progressive social movements concerned with the need to deeply transform the state by implementing an “institutional assault.” In his analysis, the other two hypotheses were the “techno-political” hacker and online activist approach of *Red Ciudadana-Partido X*, and the “national-popular” agenda formulated by *Podemos*,

⁶⁹ It is well known that the global crisis originated inside the housing sector: a real state bubble linked to the so-called *subprime* loans that grew exponentially in the years leading to it (see, among many other sources, documentaries like *The Push*, 2019, or the *Meltdown* series done by Public Broadcasting Service available at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/go/financial-crisis/>). The USA and Spain were two of the most affected countries, with a subsequent cascade of millions of foreclosures and evictions that disproportionately impacted racialized families and communities (Gertten, 2019; Valiño, 2014; see also Reports by United Nations Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Adequate Housing, 2009, 2012, 2017). Official data for the city of Barcelona indicates that in the seven years after the 2008 financial crisis the number of foreclosures grew by two hundred per cent, while unemployment reached almost twenty per cent of the population (cited Blanco, Salazar & Bianchi, 2020, p. 25).

⁷⁰ Some authors signal the reform of the Spanish Constitutional in 2011 as the starting point of a set of fiscal austerity measures promoted by the central government with a strong impact on the local governance (Blanco, Salazar & Bianchi, 2020, p. 22), including the subsequent Law for Rationalization and Sustainability of Local Administrations, known as “Ley Montoro”, also approved by the conservative Partido Popular in 2016, “not coincidentally shortly after the access to cities power by the Municipalist Confluences” (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019, p. 9).

⁷¹ With longstanding roots across European countries, municipal politics were crucial part of socialist and anarchist projects during the nineteen and early twentieth centuries. For more detailed analysis of this history and its contemporary relevance in the case of Spain in general, and Barcelona in particular, see Rubio-Pueyo (2017), Bianchi (2018) and Blanco, Salazar & Bianchi (2020).

currently part of the national government together with the center-left Socialist Party of Spain (PSOE).

Similarly, Blanco and Gomà (2019) point out the double challenge of overcoming the fragmentation of social mobilization and practices (i.e. housing, education, health, and so on), and the need to (re)connect the social and the political (institutional) arenas, amidst what is characterized as an “epochal change” that involves the crisis of the prevailing (capitalist) economic growth model, a crisis of representation and a new era marked by the prominence of cities (pp. 59-61).⁷² In their analysis, Barcelona represents a kind of ground zero of the neomunicipalist wave in Spain that can be explained by a combination of a set particular elements⁷³ including: the city’s well-established socio-political tradition of self-organizing and mutual aid networks; its proven record of policy innovation (from urbanism and social inclusion to cooperative economy and technological sovereignty); and the fact that discussions around the possibilities of creating a citizens’ platform to participate in the local elections started as early as 2013 and, from there, rapidly expanded to Madrid and more than a hundred cities across the country within a two-year period (Blanco & Gomà, 2019; Osuna, 2015; Rubio-Pueyo, 2019).⁷⁴ Within this context, different authors agree that the strength and visibility of the anti-eviction movement, grouped since 2009 around the

⁷² The authors refer to the prominence of cities in global demographic, economic, political, and sociocultural terms.

⁷³ With around five million inhabitants in its metropolitan area, Barcelona is the second largest urban center in Spain and a fundamental economic node for the country and the region, mostly fueled by industrial and touristic activities. The city is proud of its Republican tradition and active role during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the resistance against Franco’s dictatorship (1939-1975). Since the first local democratic elections in 1979, municipal politics and institutions have been considered strong for decades, although not always pursuing progressive social transformations. The so-called Barcelona urban “model” and its transformations between the 1980s and the 2000s clearly reflect some of those tensions and contractions: from grassroots participation, decentralization, public spaces and cultural identity, to greater private sector intervention, top-down decision-making, gentrification and city marketing (Borja, 2007; 2010; Degen & García, 2012; Marshall, 2000; 2004).

⁷⁴ A map showing the Spanish Municipalist Confluences at the beginning of 2015 is available at Rubio-Pueyo (2017, p. 3). For more details about the projects they have supported as part of government’s programmes between 2015 and 2019 see *Atlas del cambio* - <http://ciudadesdelcambio.org/>.

Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca-PAH (Platform of Mortgage Victims), represents one of the main promoters of the broader political platform that eventually won the local elections in 2015 (*Guanyem Barcelona*, literally meaning Let's Win Barcelona, later changed to *Barcelona en Comú*, Barcelona in Common).⁷⁵ Together, these events are fundamental in explaining the role the city has been playing in fostering a municipalist agenda within Spain and beyond (Blanco, Gomà & Subirats, 2018; Blanco, Salazar & Bianchi, 2020; Colau & Alemany, 2013; Charnock & Ribera-Fumaz, 2017; Faus, 2016).⁷⁶

Situating its emergence within a wider historical and geopolitical context—from nineteenth century anarcho-syndicalism and municipal socialism across Europe, to the contemporary profusion of more or less technocratic city networks and policy diffusion mechanisms—, Thompson (2020) stresses that “the novelty of new municipalism resides in a newly-politicized and radical-reformist orientation towards the (local) state, in imagining new institutional formations that embody *urban* rather than state logics” (p. 2, emphasis in the original).⁷⁷ In his opinion, this is visible in political-economic dynamics that question the restrictive nature of party politics and turn towards broader, direct citizens’ participation and a more prominent role of the social economy and the cooperative sector. While recognizing the vanguard role of Barcelona in promoting the new municipalist movement beyond Spain, Thompson (2020) provides an interesting

⁷⁵ The political platforms or confluences, that certainly took different shapes in different cities, usually include/d a combination of progressive/left-wing political forces and a wide range of social movements, unions, civil society institutions and individuals.

⁷⁶ See Blanco, Gomà & Subirats (2018) for more details about the socio-political relevance and impact of the PAH during the past decade.

⁷⁷ According to Thompson (2020), state-centrism (or what critical urban scholars have also identified as “methodological nationalism”, see Mahon & Keil, 2009, p. 10, quoting Brenner; also found in Tomiak et al. 2019, p. 5) in social sciences is a prominent feature that concerns both critical urban studies and the literature on municipalism, although they have rarely been in conversation (Thompson, 2020, p. 2). Among other elements, urban politics are seen as less confined and fluid, relying more heavily on everyday interactions and proximity, as well as on multi-sectoral alliances and multi-scalar dynamics.

characterization of three different “models of municipalism” that take into consideration examples from other countries and continents: platform, autonomist and managed municipalism (p. 12). In his analysis, the Spanish *confluences* and Berlin, Rojava (Syria) or Jackson (USA) represent cases of the first two (i.e., platform and autonomist municipalism) as they share many similarities and a common radical approach to political-economic and social transformation. Alternatively, the cases of Preston (UK) and Cleveland (USA) are characterized by a much more “technocratic” approach (i.e. managed municipalism).

Several authors address the question of what is “new” about “new municipalism” and the place it occupies in a broader constellation of city-based socio-political processes. As a direct participant in the movement, feminist scholar-activist Laura Roth (2019) sees new municipalism as a “political strategy” that in a context of widespread frustration with representative democracy and the ascendance of the extreme right, aims not only to implement progressive policies but also to change the understanding and practices of politics. Taking the local sphere as the most appropriate scenario for experimenting with radical transformations, Roth (2019) signals both the similarities and differences of new municipalism when compared with five other “models” of city prominence worldwide. At what could be conceived as the two ends of the spectrum, these include autarchic (“autonomist” in Thompson’s classification) and market versions, whether they focus on issues of self-sufficiency and autonomy (including the *transition movement*) or see cities as places for profit-making and competitiveness. The other two options are more focused on the (local) state and administrative dimension, highlighting the need to strengthen institutions, competences, resources and policies, *vis-à-vis* national, supranational, and

global powers (like United Cities and Local Governments, analyzed in Chapter four). That characterization allows Roth (2019) to identify some features in common but, most importantly, the relevant elements that make new municipalist' agendas, in her opinion, unique. These include four important dimensions: a critical approach to power relations and the distribution of power; (public) institutions and communities as two pieces of one and the same strategy; an explicit rejection of neoliberalism; and networked collaboration. Given that some of these features are also arguably present in other municipalist networks mentioned by the author, I would claim that their uniqueness resides more in the fact that these important ingredients become visibly and intentionally entangled as part of a political project of social transformation, and not as hidden or standalone elements.

Locally rooted as they are, municipalist movements are necessarily diverse in their particular configurations and strategies. However, scholars agree that they share theoretical influences as well as practical features in their political agendas, concerned not only with resisting neoliberal logics but also with creating and fostering concrete, placed-based and networked alternatives. These include at least four clear streams —although not always explicit or interconnected— around libertarian municipalism (Bookchin), the right to the city (Lefebvre, Harvey), feminism and the commons (Federici and others).⁷⁸ A Municipalist Manifesto (2016), resulting from what is considered a foundational gathering that brought together hundreds of representatives from more than thirty Spanish cities, plus Italy, England, Austria and Germany, offers a fascinating synthesis of these conceptual influences when identifying similar concerns and proposals for a common action plan.⁷⁹ A

⁷⁸ According to Thompson (2020), eco-socialism and degrowth influences are also prominent in autonomist municipalism (Thompson, 2020, Table 1, p. 12).

⁷⁹ Posted on September 2016 at the European Institute of Progressive Cultural Policy's e-zine transversal (eipep.net).

total of seventeen points are presented around five main axes: 1) organization of the municipalist movement; 2) self-managed social spaces/centres; 3) social unionism and social rights; 4) work, cooperativism and re-municipalization; 5) an European network of rebel cities. From the commitment to maintain independence from traditional, centralized political parties to the recognition of the need to foster multi-sectoral and multi-scalar alliances for the self-management of the commons, these multiple social movements have outlined several concrete steps that many of them would seek to implement once in government.

Conceived as a counterforce to both neoliberalism/austerity and growing neofascism/right wing authoritarianism, the municipalist program identifies the need to navigate strategies that may appear contradictory but are in fact better understood as forces in tension: strengthening autonomy, social mobilization and democratic decision-making, while at the same time experimenting with a “new institutionalism”.⁸⁰ In order to advance along this path, neomunicipalist movements seem to be fully aware that they are required to transform at the same time material conditions and collective imaginaries, creating new narratives and realities that can feed “a new social common sense” (Municipal Manifesto, 2016). Before analyzing in more detail some of the initiatives implemented in Barcelona and other cities during the past years, the following section explores crucial linkages shared by the new municipalism and the right to the city —although not always identified as such.

⁸⁰

In the context of new municipalism, discussions around the need to transform “institutions” are always conceived in terms of not just “occupying” but reforming the local state to better respond to social needs and aspirations, while promoting “real”, radical democracy that expands “common people” decision making power.

New municipalism and the right to the city: overlapping theory and practice

As mentioned above, scholars agree that right to the city was part of the political repertoires that the so-called municipalist confluences in Spain drew upon from early on, along with libertarian confederalism, social ecology or the commons. However, in most cases references to these influences seem to remain at a more or less superficial level, and the literature dealing with these lineages in greater depth seems to be still limited.⁸¹ Interestingly, in one of the few articles that explicitly analyzes the connections between the recent municipalist political projects and the theoretical formulation of the right to the city put forward by Lefebvre (1968/1996), Rubio-Pueyo (2019) discusses its transformative potential around three main categories that, in his opinion, could help to “interpellate and interrogate practice, in order to expand our political imagination” (p. 1). These include: 1) the “politics of proximity”, self-determination and direct, “real democracy”; 2) the issue of scale, both in the sense of the urban as “mediation among mediations” and as political strategy to avoid the “local trap”; 3) the “recuperation/re-elaboration of the notion of citizenry”, detached from the neoliberal, consumerist and taxpayer individual, to be instead centered around the action of inhabiting —the city as collective *oeuvre*, with its multiple and dynamic, non-essentialist and heterogeneous notions of belonging and community (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019, p. 18).

Building on similar arguments, Russell (2020) also engages the relevance of the right to the city approach when discussing the possibilities to foster a municipalist movement in his hometown of Manchester. A scholar-activist himself, this author stresses

⁸¹ It is worth noticing that while scholars working on new municipalism have explored some of the conceptual and political connections with the right to the city formulation, the opposite seems not to be happening —i.e., scholars working on the right to the city rarely if ever refer to the new municipalism (even if authors like Purcell deal with issues of urban democracy).

the significance of taking “*political* scale seriously”, as the site where decision making power about people’s lives and *territories* can be (re)appropriated and not just as places where more or less progressive (“socialist”) policies can be implemented (Russell, 2020, p. 96, emphasis added). The key notions of self-governance and *autogestion* are once again called upon to give content and direction to the everyday politics of contestation and experimentation based on proximity and material relations as part of a broader strategy that works “in, against, and beyond the state”, and therefore not confined to the framework of liberal rights or capitalist logics (Russell, 2020, p. 102).

From a somehow different but complementary perspective that connects the Spanish cases with global processes, Blanco, Gomà and Subirats (2018) focus on the relevance of the right to the city as the cornerstone for an urban agenda based on the commons. Understanding the new municipalism as “project and transformative praxis” that includes both social mobilization and the reconfiguration of institutions for multi-scalar, social and collective democratic governance, these scholars highlight the need and opportunity for the reconstitution of a “shared public sphere” based on cross-sectoral alliances and co-production processes (p. 16). In the context of what has been described as the new urban era, they conceive of the local level as the “motor for the reconstruction of the communitarian logic of democracy” and “the collective logic of rights” and as a fundamental site for the promotion of alternatives beyond resistance (Blanco, Gomà & Subirats, 2018, p. 25). With references to municipalism both within Spain and in international networks of cities (i.e., UCLG), they identify strong shared commitments to urban ecology, citizens’ economies and wellbeing of proximity that articulate actions and

policies around five key axes: open democracy, cooperative economy, basic rights, environmental sustainability, and solidarity.

Broadening the scope of analysis beyond considerations at the theoretical/conceptual level, I would argue that the massive and sustained occupation of public squares during the 2011-2015 period is probably the most powerful material and political-symbolic crystallizations of the common elements shared by the right to the city and municipalist movements. Reclaiming streets and public spaces “for people and not for profit” became an urgent and widespread demand amidst the visible urban impacts of the neoliberal and austerity agendas promoting privatization, gentrification, and socio-spatial segregation. The infrastructure and services needed for social reproduction were under attack and social mobilization arose to defend them all over the world. At the same time, it was clear that at the core of these destructive dynamics was a drastic reduction of the public sphere and an entrepreneurial approach to politics in general, and urban governance in particular. Slogans and banners (like “Real Democracy Now” or “They Don’t Represent Us”) have pointed out the limits of liberal, representative democracy and (often corrupt) governments responding to the economic interest of powerful and influential corporations, particularly at the urban/municipal level (Image 4). It then comes as no surprise that social movements fighting for housing rights and the right to the city were not only actively involved in protests and experimentations in the post 2008 crisis but actually became key protagonists in igniting broader (urban) political movements that were formed in and after this explosive conjuncture.

Image 4: Slogans from the 15M Movement, Spain

Source: C. Alvarez. https://elpais.com/politica/2012/04/23/actualidad/1335212093_805436.html

Note: “Democracia Real Ya” was the main slogan and name of the grassroots organization behind the foundational rally of the 15M movement in Madrid, May 15th, 2011. The banner says: “Real Democracy Now! We are not a commodity in the hands of politicians and bankers”.

Particularly when analyzing the case of new municipalism in Barcelona, an additional layer of direct and personal relations between activists might also help to explain the presence of some elements clearly linked with right to the city principles in the political agenda being put forward. For example, current Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau (2015-)⁸² and former Vice-Mayor Gerardo Pisarello (2015-2019)⁸³ are both housing rights activists with strong ties to international movements advocating for the right to the city. As a young squatter

⁸² More details about Ada Colau’s trajectory are available at <https://studylib.es/doc/4084812/publica-su-cv>. The documentary *Ada for Mayor* (Faus, 2016) offers a fascinating account of personal and institutional paths leading to the formation of *Barcelona en Comú*.

⁸³ Born and raised in Argentina, where his father was assassinated by the dictatorship that took control of the country in the mid 1970s, Pisarello is a constitutionalist lawyer specialized on housing rights. He was elected in 2019 as representative at the National Parliament that sits in Madrid.

and university professor, respectively, they participated in seminars and public events organized by the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) and other civil society networks in Barcelona as part of the collective process for the elaboration of the World Charter for the Right to the City (2005). A few years later, both joined the Observatory on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ODESC), an NGO based in Barcelona producing research and advocacy within Spain and beyond which is also an active member of HIC. Within this framework, they had the opportunity to engage in several global gatherings, such as multiple editions of the World Social Forum and the World Urban Forum in different cities and regions, including Mexico City (2008), Belém do Pará (2009) and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil (2010),⁸⁴ and Naples, Italy (2012). Colau also took part in a Latin American workshop to discuss strategies to advance the right to the city in Latin America in Quito in 2009, Ecuador, where the proposed contents for the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City were presented and debated among dozens of activists and organizations. She was one of the primary and most visible promoters of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca-PAH* (Platform of Mortgage Victims), created that same year as a mobilizing and advocacy tool in the context of the widespread housing crisis in Spain generated as a result of the global financial meltdown.

Against this backdrop of entangled personal and institutional relations, theoretical and practical cross-fertilizing processes, it is possible to see how critical issues linked to the right to the city would emerge as central to the *Barcelona en Comú* political platform. In its project of government, access to housing appears explicitly entangled with expanded

⁸⁴ Where David Harvey discussed the right to the city with social movements and hundreds of activists from Brazil, Latin America and beyond (see footnote #40 in Chapter two of this thesis).

notions of citizenship (i.e. migrants' rights regardless legal status), the promotion of the social and solidarity economy (i.e. *via* housing cooperatives and support to street vendors living in precarious conditions), and the prevalence of the social function of property to confront accumulation, speculation and gentrification processes that deepen economic precarity and spatial segregation.⁸⁵ While the language and many of the proposals clearly resonate with those found in the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City (a city of rights, a city of direct democracy, a city that is habitable and just, or a city for the common good), the political programme put forward by new municipalist movements certainly brings, as the next section exposes, additional fundamental elements for a transformative urban agenda in the twentieth first century.

New municipalism transforming cities and politics: key strategies and significant contributions from Barcelona and beyond

If new municipalism is, first and foremost, a different way to understand and practice of (grounded) politics, what are the main concrete forms in which this change is taking place? As discussed above, several authors point out a shared commitment to implement mechanisms of radical democracy, both inside and outside institutions, as the path to advance the redistribution of power and resources. In such a view, the need to transform local governments runs in parallel with active organizing and mobilization from individuals and communities. More specifically, this is translated into two⁸⁶ main socio-political strategies: the feminization of politics and the co-production/co-management of the

⁸⁵ Including measures such as the requisition of empty housing in the hands of banks and other financial institutions, or negotiation/regulation of touristic apartments managed through platforms such as Airbnb.

⁸⁶ A third one consisting in the already mentioned “overflows” of traditional party politics and the formation of new “confluences” and citizen-driven political platforms (see Rubio-Pueyo, 2017).

commons. There is also consensus that the case of Barcelona is not the only one that ignited the process but probably the most advanced so far (it is therefore not surprising that those elements can be easily found there). The multi-scalar and multi-sectoral perspective of municipalist movements that so clearly resonates with right to the city movements (see Chapters two and four) can also be traced in the incorporation of feminist urbanism and the caring cities paradigm by, and to the creation of and participation in trans-local and international networks such as Fearless Cities and United Cities and Local Governments.⁸⁷ Before proceeding, it should be stated that what follows is not intended as a policy analysis exercise *per se*, but rather an effort to show how new municipalist movements are connecting and expanding narratives and practices linked to the right to the city and a feminist approach to the commons, social reproduction and politics.

Feminization of politics

Considered as a central feature of the new municipalist movement, the feminization of politics implies not only a more egalitarian representation (i.e. more women in decision-making positions) and/or policies that challenge traditional gender roles and patriarchy, but also a different conceptualization and practice of power that revolves around the key notions of everyday life, social relationships, the role of the community and the common good (Roth, 2019; Roth & Shea Baird, 2017). Away from the individualistic, vertical, confrontational, and theory-based ways of doing politics (identified as masculine), citizen's platforms in Barcelona and other cities are committed to a more relational, horizontal,

⁸⁷ Although certainly different, new municipalist (<http://fearlesscities.com/en/about-fearless-cities>) and other local governments' networks (<https://www.uclg.org/>) present interesting and potentially transformative overlapping features. In fact, Barcelona is not only the site where world secretariats of these two networks are located but also a significant political force behind them both. A detailed discussion of these elements is included in Chapter four.

cooperative and practice-based approach. This means promoting and supporting collective leadership, listening abilities and the opportunity to express contradictions and doubt as part of political discourse. Not obsessed with homogenization, competitiveness and hierarchy, a “feminist” approach values diversity, difference, collaboration, and dialogue.

According to Roth and Shea Baird (2017), the timeframe of doing politics is also different: from the urgency that justifies and reproduces top-down, masculinist patterns, to the long-term transformation of gender relations backed by socio-cultural changes (i.e., structures, relationships, languages, use of time and space, definition of social priorities). In other words, this approach emphasizes a “learning by doing” perspective, necessarily dynamic and flexible, that combines radical goals with concrete action. In clear opposition to national populisms (from both right and left), these authors highlight how the (new) municipalism offers a local “we” based on residence and shared concerns, rather than legal citizenship or ethnic identity, linked to nation-states and their patriarchal/sexist, colonial/xenophobic and capitalist/classist origins (Roth and Shea Baird, 2017, p. 106).⁸⁸ The awareness around the intertwined dynamics of privilege and oppression, together with the constant questioning of the artificial and hierarchical division of the public and private, productive and reproductive spheres, are foundations for multi-scalar political strategies that necessarily connect the local, the trans-local and the global.

Based on the findings of a Fearless Cities network project on the feminization of politics developed between 2018 and 2019 in six European cities,⁸⁹ plus some additional

⁸⁸ Even if not further developed by the authors, this is an important idea that clearly resonates with Lefebvre’s formulation on the right to the city and his notion of citizenship based in residence and everyday interactions, rights, and aspirations. At the same time, it is also connected with the need to define a community (or multiple, flexible and overlapping collective identities) in charge of the commons, as discussed by Ostrom, Harvey and others.

⁸⁹ Including *Barcelona en Comú*, *Marea Atlántica* in La Coruña, Galicia, *Zagreb je NA.!*, *Ne davimo Beograd* in Belgrade, *L’Asilo Massa Critica* in Naples, and Madrid’s *M129*.

interviews with representatives of municipalist movements such as *Muitas* from Belo Horizonte (Brazil), Reclaim the City in Cape Town (South Africa) and *Ciudad Futura* from Rosario (Argentina), a recent publication provides both an assessment of the challenges and lessons learnt, as well as a roadmap for organizations willing to deepen their work on a feminist approach to politics. Conceived as a toolkit that can potentially inspire and guide similar efforts, the reflections and concrete recommendations are grouped around seven interrelated strategic topics: gender balance; cooperation and power relations; leadership; care; participation and democracy; diversity and intersectionality; non-violence. Despite the wide array of cases and the important differences they present, including the level of institutionalization and the patriarchal logics they confront, the authors highlight how these movements have been successful in “placing feminist issues on the agenda” and have started to “feminize politics” (Bartolomé, Regelman, Martínez-Lobo & Spaeth, 2020).

Caring cities and feminist urbanism

Particularly relevant for my research interests are the discourses and practices linked to the *ciudades cuidadoras* (caring cities) and *urbanismo feminista* (feminist urbanism) because they represent an appealing amalgam of the principles and proposals that cut across new municipalism, the right to the city, social reproduction, and the commons.⁹⁰ In the case of Barcelona, the allegiance of *Barcelona en Comú* to these commitments has translated into a set of concrete policies and actions. Along with the equal representation of women as

⁹⁰ Although the gender/feminist approach to urban issues is certainly not new (Fenster, 2005; Little, Peake & Richardson, 1988; Massey, 1994), *Barcelona en Comú* has incorporated this dimension as a fundamental element for its transformative agenda. More recently, female Mayors in Bogotá, Colombia, Mexico City or Montevideo in Uruguay, are also including explicit care and urban feminist components in their policies and programmes. At the academic level, it is interesting to note that, while feminist geographers and planners are familiar with debates around care and social reproduction, scholars working on those topics from other disciplinary fields rarely take into consideration an explicit spatial or territorial approach (cf. Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2016; Giardini & Simone, 2015; Hall, 2016).

candidates and public officials, and the mainstreaming of a gender and diversity approach to all public policies, its programme highlights the centrality of care and the implementation of supporting social and urban initiatives. Among others worth mentioning are: a) a significant expansion of the social policy budget (more than forty percent since 2015), including direct social transfers such as basic income and economic aid to single mothers; b) improvement of labor conditions for care-related workers (many of them migrants), providing more stability, full-time employment, a fourteen percent salary increase and ongoing, paid training; and c) the expansion of child care.⁹¹ Inspired by bottom-up initiatives and working in collaboration with social organizations, the local government has also established an anti-eviction unit, a moratorium on touristic/short term rentals in centrally located areas, and significant support for public and cooperative housing projects.

At the same time, building on the work of organizations such as the Collective Point 6,⁹² the new urban policy known as the “superblock” and “green hubs/corridors” connects feminist perspectives on proximity, autonomy, diversity, vitality and representativity to the right to public space and environmental concerns (Image 5). Conceived as spaces that prioritize proximal everyday life and pedestrians, this intervention seeks to create “healthier, safer, more sustainable and more humane places” by adding new green and recreational areas that foster social interaction and well-being, while supporting the local, small-scale economy and reducing pollution (Adjuntament de Barcelona, 2020, p. 1). What

⁹¹ All figures coming from a recent session (March 22, 2021) of a seminar series organized by MINIM-Municipalism Observatory in which I am participating since early 2020. More details about the work of this group available at <https://minim-municipalism.org/>.

⁹² A group of feminist urbanists working at the intersection of professionals, academic, grassroots, and public institutions. Multimedia training and other action-oriented materials are available at <http://www.punt6.org/en/home/>.

started as three specific pilot projects is now expanding as a model to other parts of the city and gaining scale, although with a commitment to maintaining its participatory character and therefore respond to the conditions and aspirations of different neighbourhoods. According to some observers, the “care superblocks” are a powerful tool for activating communities and their capacities of self-management.⁹³

Image 5: Barcelona’s superblock model

Source: Ajuntament de Barcelona website. <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/superilles/en/>

⁹³ Scholars participating at the MINIM seminar (March 22, 2021) agreed that, since 2015, there is a noticeable change in the prominence of care as an organizing factor for public policy and community organizing in Barcelona.

(Urban) commoning as political-economic tool

From a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, several authors agree that the urban commons currently represent a promising field of debate and experimentation for agendas committed to emancipation and social transformation (Blanco, Gomà & Subirats, 2018; Castro-Coma & Martí-Costa, 2016; Deleixhe, 2018; Duru, 2018; Dellenbaugh et al., 2015; Enright & Rossi, 2018; Huron, 2015). Natural, material, and cultural assets—including water and energy, parks and community facilities, digital tools, care activities and collective knowledge—are once again at the center of practices and policies that seek to confront privatization and neoliberal governance, emphasizing instead sustainability and democratic management. Crucial in the conceptualization is the notion of *commoning*, understood as a focus on the social relations involved in permanent (re)enactments rather than objects *per se* (Federici & Caffentzis, 2019). Within this framework, feminist scholars have stressed the prominent role of women in defending and protecting the commons, both historically and in the present, while highlighting the close linkages between social cooperation, communal property, and social reproduction (Federici 2012, 2013; Federici & Caffentzis, 2019; Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001; Quiroga Díaz & Gago, 2014, 2017).

Not surprisingly, the new municipalist movement has explicitly embraced the discourse of the commons, promoting relevant initiatives to expand their reach. In the case of the so-called *ciudades del cambio* (cities of change) in Spain, “in common” was explicitly incorporated as a kind of last name for most of the electoral platforms that ran for office and won in 2015. According to different analyses, this was far more than just a slogan or a symbolic move, but one with important political and material implications. On

the one hand, it represented the need and possibility to engage ordinary citizens in public affairs, outside and beyond the traditional (and exhausted) party system. On the other, it opened the door to reclaim goods and services as commons that can be managed by the communities,⁹⁴ strengthening and promoting social organization and *autogestión*. In other words, “a political struggle oriented towards a “commoning” of the public sphere (...) turning institutions into infrastructures for the common good” (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017, p. 21).

In the case of *Barcelona en Comú*, this commitment took the form of a wide range of policies and initiatives from both inside and outside the government. Among the first ones are the transfer of land, buildings, and spaces to community organizations; the promotion of the social and solidarity economy sector; and the co-management (public-social) or re-municipalization of essential services and facilities (Bianchi, 2018; Blanco & Gomà, 2019; Blanco, Gomà & Subirats, 2018; Junqué & Shea Baird, 2018; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017; Russell & Reyes, 2017; Thompson, 2020). Two concrete examples are particularly noteworthy. First, the implementation of a city-wide *Plan de Barrios* (Neighbourhoods’ Plan) that, since 2016 and with a significant budget of 150 million euros, articulates many of those material, economic and cultural interventions. The second example is the creation of *Barcelona Energía* in 2018, the municipal producer of renewable energy for the metropolitan area.⁹⁵ Beyond governmental policies, *Barcelona en Comú* has also put forward some relevant projects such as the “The Commune-Commons’s School” for

⁹⁴ In her PhD dissertation, Iolanda Bianchi (2018) discusses the tensions between “the production of The Common” and “the production of The Public” in terms of the role of the state *vis-à-vis* emancipatory projects, based on an in-depth analysis of three case studies from Barcelona.

⁹⁵ Synthetic information can be seen at <http://ciudadesdelcambio.org/politica-publica/plan-de-barrios>, <http://ciudadesdelcambio.org/politica-publica/barcelona-energia>. Re-municipalization initiatives are also documented as part of the Transnational Institute’ Transformative Cities Awards and Atlas of Utopias (<https://transformativecities.org/atlas/energy2/>). Academics such as Bianchi (2018), Blanco, Gomà & Subirats (2018) and Blanco, Salazar & Bianchi (2020) also analyzed some of the urban policies being implemented in Barcelona.

critical thinking and political activism, and *La Filadora* (The Spinning Machine), an incubator of dozens of social initiatives financed with the mandatory savings from public officials' salaries.⁹⁶

Beyond electoral cycles: initial balance and open questions

Since the victory in the 2015 local elections in Spain,⁹⁷ the ambitious programme of radical municipalism has faced multiple internal and external challenges, both from within the institutions and from social movements. As citizen's parties that gained positions in the local government, they have been treated as "intruders", seeing their legitimacy and (professional) capabilities constantly questioned by the political, economic and media powers that represent the status quo. The municipalist agenda focusing on addressing issues such as housing, tourism and the so-called smart cities from a social justice and commons perspective, resulted in fierce opposition and constant attacks by powerful local, national, and international lobbies. At the same time, the electoral politics imposed a results-oriented logic and a reduced timeframe that generated tensions inside the new parties and affected their alliances inside and outside the government —where they were always in minority. For the social movements that gave birth and supported the "municipalist hypothesis" (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019; 2020), these past years have been an extremely demanding experience accompanied by contrasting feelings. The high expectations and difficulties

⁹⁶ More details about these projects available at <https://escoladelcomu.cat/ca/activitats> and <https://filadora.barcelonaencomu.cat/es/que-es>. Maximum income caps and other regulations for candidates within *Barcelona en Comú* (including relevant issues such as democratization of political representation, auditing and accountability; financing, transparency and expenditure management; professionalization of politics, reduction of privileges and measures to tackle corruption) were decided as part of the collectively elaborated "code of ethics" — subtitled "governing by obeying", as per the acknowledged influence from the Mexican *Zapatistas* (see full text at <https://barcelonaencomu.cat/sites/default/files/pdf/codi-etec-eng.pdf>).

⁹⁷ It is important to note that only Barcelona remains in the hands of the new municipalist confluences after the 2019 elections in Spain.

attached to being simultaneously inside and outside government generated an important dose of frustration and exhaustion, both at individual and collective levels. Despite the efforts to change it, the bureaucratic inertia and electoral priorities did affect several projects and initiatives deemed not just necessary but urgent.

However, at the level of the policies implemented in Barcelona, specialized authors seem to agree that the overall balance is a positive one. Although with considerable limitations, the measures taken to protect and guarantee social rights such as food, healthcare, income, housing, energy, transportation, and public spaces are seen as critical in terms of both resolving immediate needs and setting more just, democratic, and ecological paths for the medium and long run. Even recognizing that “[t]he political discourse of the leaders of *Barcelona en Comú* has moderated” since it took up the government, many consider that there is consolidation of a new political agenda that, if not a “radical rupture”, represents a “major shift in the priorities of institutional action” previously fully oriented towards neoliberalism (Blanco, Salazar & Bianchi, 2020, p. 28). The significant changes are seen in four main areas: a) public leadership in urban economy; b) social rights as a focus for policies; c) sustainable habitability and mobility; and d) accountability and public-community cooperation in the co-production of public policies.

A report recently produced by civil society organizations —self-defined as “the social pillar of municipalism”—highlights several relevant elements for a broader evaluation of the recent period across different cities in Spain (Álvarez Vispo, Arroyo Escudero & Calles Colado, 2019). Notably, their analysis frames the institutional experimentations as part of a wider, multilayered, and complex process of social mobilization and cultural-political transformation, with both roots in the past and branches

into the future. This “transformative municipalism” is therefore constituted by a combination of strategies that include dissidence, resistance, and advocacy “from below” in an effort to navigate the crucial tensions of being inside and outside the government as well as addressing short terms needs and long-term changes.⁹⁸ From such an approach, key questions arise once again from the protagonists, including: How to support innovative public policies without losing social autonomy? How to overcome the “productivist lens” that focuses on specific goals and results without necessarily placing life at the center? How to build a municipalist movement from and for care, including the needs and aspirations of both individuals and collective processes? It goes without saying that these and other vital interrogations are conceived as dynamic formulations that should help guide reflections on the lessons learnt and the adjustments needed for moving along the path, rather than fixating on issues that are difficult to resolve. Of particular concern for these organizations and movements are issues related to the possibilities of full and meaningful participation (i.e., not reduced to mere consultations or other instrumental exercises) as well as the critical need of re-balancing urban-rural linkages.

Conclusions

A more general reflection, connecting this chapter with the previous and the following ones, points to some important elements worth highlighting for further exploration. First and foremost, as the analysis so far has tried to show, new municipalism and the right to the city are transformative agendas explicitly addressing the redistribution of political and

⁹⁸ Some authors frame the main challenges of movements engaged in the “municipalism of the commons” as the need to articulate the three different logics delegation (advocacy), denouncing (resistance) and creation (dissidence) (Blanco, Gomà & Subirats, 2018, figure 8, p. 27).

economic power from a grounded, historical-geographical perspective. For each, key principles guide the prefiguration of alternatives that go against and beyond colonial/capitalist/patriarchal and liberal-democratic state logics: a) an expanded notion of citizenship and radical democracy; b) de-commodification and social and collective rights; and c) reconfiguration of the public sphere and the self-management of the commons. While the right to the city movements, particularly from Mexico and Latin America, have expanded some conceptual and practical dimensions that directly (even if not always explicitly) inspired new municipalist agendas, such as the social production of habitat and the territorial/ecological approach (see Chapter two), these in turn have brought forward fundamental components to (re)imagine and (re)create cities and regions from a stronger feminist approach (something not equally present in the different formulations of the right to the city agenda). Finally, recognizing and celebrating diversity and difference, they both understand the need and the relevance of putting forward multi-sectoral and multi-scalar alliances, fostering shared narratives, and connecting seemingly dispersed and isolated efforts (see Chapter four). Consequently, their strategies are necessarily multiple and complex, transiting political and economic, social, and cultural, material, and symbolic fields.

The open, dynamic, and process-oriented politics at the heart of new municipalism and the right to the city appear to be unevenly treated in academic analyses (a kind of double standard at play?). To some extent, it seems as if some of the elements that are evaluated as positive for the new municipalism are instead seen as negative, or even invisibilized, in the case of the right to the city movements. These include at least two different dimensions, namely the weight of theory/theory creation *vis-à-vis* the analysis of

specific cases, and the so-called inside/outside practical approach to political action. On the one hand, the former is somehow presented as more loosely attached to intellectual traditions and specific scholars (such as Bookchin, Lefebvre, Harvey or Federici), and able to produce relevant conceptual contributions through the concrete experimentations happening in different places. Meanwhile, the latter are usually (severely) judged in reference to one author (Lefebvre), and their initiatives are seen as more or less interesting “case studies” but without relevant substantive implications in terms of wide-scale social transformation or for significantly expanding our understanding of urban and territorial dynamics. On the other hand, the emphasis put by new municipalism on working both within and in parallel to state institutions is celebrated as a sophisticated political strategy that can help navigate the tensions between reform-revolution and produce a significant change in the public-community relationship and state forms. Conversely, and by clearly a different metric, some of the initiatives taken by the right to the city movements (i.e., Charters and Constitutions) are framed as legalistic, reformist and non-revolutionary, when not depicted as openly counterproductive endeavours totally disconnected from other transformative actions those same movements and others are putting forward.

Overall, it is clear to me that scholars and social movements engaged in these fields of struggle will benefit from the possibility to access more permanent and systematic spaces for dialogue, mutual learning, and joint experimentation. They both face the challenge to overcome disciplinary and sectorial fragmentation and find common languages that can foster transformative, collective action. Against this backdrop, the next and final chapter attempts to provide some additional analysis of the overlapping, tensions, potentials, and limitations of the right to the city and the new municipalist agendas.

Particular attention is paid to the role of multi-sectoral and multi-scalar alliances in trans-local and international processes of learning and mobilization, as well as to the shortcomings and possibilities of a right-based, municipalist and commons agenda when seen from a decolonial lens.

Chapter 4: Right to the city, new municipalism and the feminist politics of the commons: opening paths towards decolonial horizons?

As the final component of my thesis, the objective of this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to systematize and expand the main findings about the right to the city and the new municipalist movements presented in Chapters two and three. On the other, it intends to further interrogate the challenges and potentialities of these transformative urban agendas from a decolonial perspective. With this two-pronged purpose in mind, I shift and complement the focus on the narratives and practices arising from Mexico City and Barcelona to provide a more detailed analysis of the broader configurations of trans-local political spaces and alliances in which they flourished, including the relevant dynamics of the World Social Forum and other international gatherings. Additionally, by broadening the theoretical framework to explicitly consider decolonial, more-than-western, Indigenous, and anti-racist perspectives, important gaps and tensions, but also overlaps and opportunities for dialogue and collaboration between right to the city, new municipalist and other emancipatory movements come into focus, both at epistemological and political levels.

Within this analytical exercise, two main arguments come to the fore. First, that the spaces of encounter are not isolated events but dynamic pedagogical-political processes of articulation (and differentiation) that intermingle the “local” and the “global” in complex and mutually influenced ways. As I try to show, the role of international networks and alliances is crucial to the production and circulation of shared narratives and practices as part of intentional and explicit cross-fertilizing and learning initiatives that both challenge

and blur the lines of neat and static thematic and scalar compartments. Secondly, that the main strategies put forward by the right to the city and new municipalist movements regarding the de-commodification of life and the feminization of politics hold emancipatory potential, although the decolonial voices and contents still need to be strengthened. In this framework, what I call a tridimensional narrative-in-practice that includes a combined approach to human rights *in* the city, the rights *of* the cities and the right *to* the city, seems to signal challenging but promising paths in this direction.

Mexico City and Barcelona: narratives and practices expanding the right to the city and the feminist politics of the commons

With strong historic roots in —and building on the legacy of— multiple and diverse struggles for social justice, autonomy and self-determination, the right to the city and new municipalist movements gained momentum at the turn of the new millennium. Seen from the local sphere and everyday life, the need to reclaim cities and politics from neoliberal globalization, rising corporate power, entrepreneurial (and corrupt) governments and the dismantling of the public sphere was once again crystal clear and urgent. Communities in urban centres, particularly but not only in major cities, organized to confront the privatization and gentrification of land, housing, basic services and infrastructure.⁹⁹ At the same time, social mobilizing and political innovation became increasingly trans-local and

⁹⁹ Similar protests and movements against privatizations, austerity and inequality have certainly continued over recent years in different regions, with strong manifestations in Colombia, Chile, Ecuador and Haiti in 2019, and again in 2021. In the case of Chile, the social pressure resulted in the call for a Constitutional Assembly, whose members have been elected in May 2021 with an overwhelming majority of independent and centre-left candidates (with gender parity and a significant number of Indigenous Peoples' delegates, including a Mapuche scholar recently appointed as its president). Housing rights and the right to the city are explicitly part of the discussion taking place among several organizations and movements since the end of 2020. More information available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/18/a-new-chile-political-elite-rejected-in-vote-for-constitutional-assembly> and <https://ciudadconstituyente.cl/>.

international, with key spaces/moments for coordinated global action and massive in-person gatherings. In the face of mainstream discourses synthesized under the mantras of TINA (“there is no alternative”, popularized by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan during the 1980s)¹⁰⁰ and “the end of history” (Fukuyama, 1989), a wide range of movements actively engaged in experimentations and alternatives around the banner of “another world is possible” (Conway, 2005; Conway & Singh 2009, 2011; Marcuse, 2005; Santos, 2004, 2008; Sugranyes & Mathivet, 2011). In other words, the “globalization of hope” to confront the globalization of dispossession.

Against this backdrop, and although characterized by distinctive features and embedded in very specific socio-political and cultural traditions and contexts, the right to the city and the new municipalist movements from Mexico City and Barcelona functioned not just as representative but as paradigmatic cases for my research, with many relevant elements in common but also with their own specificities. As shown in the previous chapters, at each of the sites studied, these movements are part of broader and longstanding mobilizations for urban justice and the democratization of societies. Despite the identified multiple limitations (see final sections of Chapters two and three), over the past two decades they have been able to advance innovative practices and produce emancipatory narratives that continue to inspire debates and actions in different regions. In both cases, international networks have played a major role as relevant pedagogical and political spaces for building collective knowledge and social power beyond boundaries. An explicit effort to include traditionally marginalized voices within the visible leadership of

¹⁰⁰ Following Stuart Hall’s (1988) insights for the case of London, Rubio-Pucyo (2020) stresses the explicit dismantling of local governance and political powers as a crucial component of the neoliberal agenda.

movements as well as in local, national, and international advocacy scenarios is noticeable, even if much more needs to be done on this front.

A close analysis of the narratives and practices put forward by social movements in Mexico City reveals some of the crucial contributions they have been making to the contents and experimentation around the right to the city. From the incremental production of people's neighbourhoods based on community-management (*autogestión*) and mutual aid (*ayuda mutua*), to broader political mobilization articulating diverse urban struggles (i.e. land and housing, water and sanitation, food and transportation, health and education as well as women's and Indigenous Peoples' rights) for self-determination (*autonomía*) and democratization (*poder popular*), I have argued that the main components of Lefebvre's formulation on the right to the city reverberates with practices on the ground, as part of an open and expansive process, and therefore contested and not free of contradictions. I have also highlighted that even if many demands and proposals eventually developed under the form of legal and policy formulations (in Mexico and other countries undergoing certain level of democratization and participation from below), the range of strategies was certainly much more sophisticated and complex in their entirety.

Besides claiming and defining rights from below, urban movements appropriated and transformed the spatial and political landscape with trans-generational awareness raising within the city's poorest neighbourhoods, both in central and peripheral areas. Their actions resulted in an "active" and "insurgent" citizenship (Holston, 1995, 2019; Ortiz Flores & Zárate, 2002, 2005;), defined as something different than the reduced liberal notion historically attached to private property and representative democracy in nation-states. In the case of Mexico, the weight given by Lefebvre to the place of residence as an

identity marker and political signifier assumes a much deeper meaning, rooted in longstanding Indigenous and peasants' struggles around land, territory, and collective decision-making as *pueblos* (encompassing both, people and places) and *pobladores* (those whom not only “inhabit” but actively make their places at material, symbolic and political dimensions). It is significant to note that these elements were convincingly reiterated by the participants of the *Movimiento Urbano Popular* and its allies at a recent virtual event intended to launch a nation-wide and regional process of mobilization around a potential “Mexican Charter for the Right to the City and the Territory” (provisional name under discussion).^{101 102}

From across the Atlantic, widespread social mobilization against the devastating impacts of the combined dynamics involving the gentrification of cities and the financialization of housing, along with selective dismantling of the welfare state, the imposition of austerity measures, and the rise of the far right, positioned Barcelona as a site of socio-political condensation, that in turn inspired and quickly expanded inside and outside national boundaries. Deeply frustrated with the structural limitations of representative democracy and traditional parties, grassroots organizations, activists and “common people” occupied parks, streets, and empty buildings first, and institutions later, in a massive exercise of prefigurative politics (as so many other social movements in Latin

¹⁰¹ Webinar session organized by the MUP on May 8, 2021, with social leaders from different Mexican states and some of their longstanding allies, including NGOs and academics. What resulted in a three-hour discussion, was intended as an initial consultation to check interest and possibilities to promote both provincial and nation-wide initiatives, taking inspiration from the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City (2010). Given the positive response from the more than one hundred attendees, follow-up meetings have been already scheduled. As pointed out by one of the conveners, this call is parallel but explicitly independent from the current debate around the inclusion of the right to the city in the national Constitution being promoted by some MORENA senators.

¹⁰² It is important to note that this clearly resonates with the role that territorial and regional approaches play for decolonial and anti-racist struggles in the North American context, as stressed in a recent volume analyzing Indigenous resurgence in the Urban Prairie West (Dorries et al, 2019). Reclaiming land and territory is seen as a powerful, multi-faceted tool for contesting epistemological and political binaries, boundaries, and hierarchies, while practicing “grounded normativity” and “place-based solidarity” (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016).

American countries during the 1990s and early 2000s). An explicit inside-outside strategy was outlined as part of the efforts to establish clear accountability mechanisms for the newly formed citizens-based electoral “confluences” and to maintain a productive tension that would not only question but—at least partially and momentarily—transform the status quo.

The commitment to support and to some extent even institutionalize diverse mechanisms for more direct and participatory decision-making processes (i.e., regular neighbourhoods’ assemblies combined with online tools like *Decidim*)¹⁰³ has been complemented by a fundamental element: the feminization of politics. Aware of the need to challenge power relations and promote more horizontal and collective leadership, Barcelona’s political platforms have engaged in shared experimentations around the urban commons and social reproduction, within and beyond public institutions. From such a perspective, gaining greater representation for women and implementing feminist policies is certainly necessary but not sufficient for transforming cities and societies. Unequal power dynamics and the centrality of care must be named and framed at all levels, from households and neighbourhoods to social organizations and the state.

The role of trans-local alliances for transformative action

Fluidity characterizes insurgent citizenship practices: through the entanglement of inclusion and resistance they move across the invited and the invented spaces of citizenship (Miraftab, 2009, p. 35).

¹⁰³ Originally developed in Barcelona as a free and open-source platform, the tool (literally called “We Decide”) has been adapted and is now being used in dozens of cities around the globe, including Helsinki, Mexico City, New York and Rosario. More details available at <https://decidim.org/>.

As the analysis presented in this thesis has tried to show, over the past two decades multi-sectoral and multi-scalar alliances have played a major role in advancing the right to the city and the new municipalist agendas from Mexico City, Barcelona and beyond. Sharply aware of the need to overcome the spatial, political, and epistemological fragmentation of the urban (already addressed by Lefebvre) as well as to “build broad coalitions to fight against neoliberal globalization” and for social justice, these movements actively sought to bring together a wide range of actors including grassroots organizations and activists, professionals, and academics (Santos, 2008, p. 20). Even though housing struggles were prominent in both contexts, they were explicitly articulated in terms of wider territorial, economic, cultural, and environmental concerns, therefore connecting with a kaleidoscopic array of demands and proposals necessarily encompassing more-than-urban perspectives. Tensions in priorities and strategies were and continue to be present and widely debated, although usually framed not as competing ideologies but as part of pedagogical-political processes of *diálogo de saberes* and intentional cross-fertilizing (in the sense of taking inspiration from and building upon previous contributions from other movements) in the production of shared narratives and practices, both in an expansive and intensive manner.

Pedagogical-political processes of articulation (and differentiation)

From organized networks and systematic efforts of articulation, to spontaneous and *ad hoc* alliances for joint action, all sorts of political spaces have been part of this ongoing experimentation. If opportunities for trans-local and international encounter, learning and

action were not unusual during the 1990s.¹⁰⁴ Since the early 2000s, the World Social Forum and other international events accelerated this dynamic and multiplied the occasions for both strengthening and expanding the scope and reach of transformative urban agendas, while at the same time allowing for self-criticism, questioning, and important conversations regarding Indigenous, *campesino* and rural populations needs and rights (Image 6).

Networks and organizations, such as the Habitat International Coalition (HIC), the Continental Front of Communitarian Organizations (FCOC) and the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) were instrumental not only in supporting and fueling those process but also in maintaining a kind of “institutional memory”, documenting debates, systematizing experiences and lessons learnt and identifying cross-cutting issues. While some of those organizations would eventually fade or even disappear along the way, others were created, like the International Alliance of Inhabitants (IAI), the Global Platform for the Right to the City (GPR2C) and the Fearless Cities Network. Interestingly enough, these more recent articulation efforts are presented as flexible spaces of learning, solidarity and mobilization, rather than formalized institutions; and in the last two cases, their composition is also peculiar, given that progressive/citizen-led local governments are crucial and active members.¹⁰⁵ Building on contributions from Mignolo (2011) and Santos (2008), I wonder if these processes could be understood as a kind of insurgent cosmopolitan

¹⁰⁴ As the United Nations first Summit on Environment and Development (known as the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the second Conference on Human Settlements (known as Habitat II) in Istanbul in 1996, consider landmarks for worldwide mobilization around housing rights and some of the movements’ early formulations linked to the right to the city.

¹⁰⁵ More information available at www.right2city.org and www.fearlesscities.com.

localism that, from the cities' squares to the global gatherings and *vice versa*, has allowed the right to the city and the new municipalist movements to connect and grow.¹⁰⁶

Image 6: World Social Forum in Mexico City, 2008

Source: HIC-AL archive, 2008. Used with permission.

Note: Organized by the MUP and its allies, this thematic tent on “the right to the city and habitat” at the World Social Forum in Mexico’s main plaza attracted more than 1,000 participants over several days. The banner at the entrance highlights the central themes discussed within: “against dispossession of the commons, privatization and evictions, and for housing rights and the social production of habitat.” It also features Mexican revolutionary, Emiliano Zapata, main promoter of the national agrarian reform around 1910s. Discussions at this event helped to launch the *Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City* (2010) and included access to land and the collective defence of territory as prominent issues connecting urban and rural struggles.

¹⁰⁶ Working from a decolonial perspective, Mignolo (2011) refers to “cosmopolitan localism” as a tool to reveal and confront the core elements of the modern/colonial “matrix” of power, while Santos (2008) sees the World Social Forum and similar initiatives of bottom-up globalization as expressions of “insurgent cosmopolitanism”. I come back to the discussion of these ideas in the following section.

Between 2001 and 2016, urban social movements and activists had the opportunity to share analysis and exchange strategies in a systematic and sustained way (for a detailed list of relevant “invited” and “invented” spaces and related documents see Appendix A).¹⁰⁷ Regular and decentralized editions of the World Social Forum (WSF), as well as participation inside and outside the World Urban Forum (WUF), fueled intense processes of peer-to-peer exchanges, mutual learning and identification of common agendas, strengthening existing alliances as well as forging new ones. Within this framework, the right to the city and the politicization of urban issues became powerful tools for the articulation of demands and actions under shared banners and proposals. Sectorial and cross-sectorial dialogues between grassroots, professionals and academics deepened the analysis of global trends, localized impacts, and communities’ responses in different regions. Locally grounded as they are and aware of the practical limitations for both international traveling and direct engagement of social organizations and activists at these global gatherings, urban movements and networks maintained a double commitment to always “take the neighbourhoods to the Forum and take the Forum to the neighbourhoods and to the periphery”, organizing multiple and decentralized political and cultural, intergenerational activities, including workshops, assemblies, rallies and even carnivals. Whereas the opportunities for in-person international meetings have been more limited in recent years (even before the pandemic, due to budgetary limitations and travel restrictions)

¹⁰⁷ Building on the work of Andrea Cornwall, Miraftab (2009) defines “invited” and “invented” spaces of citizenship in the following terms: “‘Invited’ spaces are defined as those grassroots actions and their allied nongovernmental organizations that are legitimized by donors and government interventions and aim to cope with systems of hardship. ‘Invented’ spaces are defined as those collective actions by the poor that directly confront the authorities and challenge the status quo. The two sorts of spaces stand in a mutually constituted, interacting relationship, not a binary one. They are not mutually exclusive, nor is either necessarily affiliated with a fixed set of individuals or groups or with a particular kind of civil society.” (Miraftab, 2009, pp. 38-39). My use of these concepts stretches the meaning to incorporate the narratives and practices on the right to the city and the new municipalism that social movements and multi-sectoral and multi-scalar platforms are putting forward *vis-à-vis* national governments and multilateral agencies, linked with the inside/outside strategies discussed in more detail in Chapter three.

they have certainly not disappeared, and networks like the Global Platform for the Right to the City and the Fearless Cities have tried to maintain that open and expansive nature of coalition building through a series of networking initiatives that connect social groups within and across scales.

The World Charter for the Right to the City (2005), as a direct result of these mobilization efforts that span several years and multiple sites in countless events and meetings inside and outside the WSF, illuminates the intertwined dynamics at play of not only articulation but also differentiation. Leadership from the Brazilian Urban Reform Movement was instrumental in inspiring and pushing this process forward, given the strong national impetus around the City's Statute (2001) and the fact that most of the initial editions of the WSF were held in Porto Alegre (2001, 2002, 2003 and 2005) —when the city and the country were governed by the Worker's Party. Under these conditions, the WSF became a relevant political node for the progressive forces in general and the institutional left in particular. This certainly marked a feature that, to a greater or lesser extent, until now represents what can be considered both a strength and a weakness of the right to the city formulation since circulating in many circles: its strong “Latin American” character. While related but different from the Lefebvrian and European conceptualizations, it resulted as being not quite appealing/relevant to those anchored in the comparatively less urbanized (although rapidly urbanizing) settings like Sub-Saharan African and South-eastern Asian countries. Prominent in these debates were the specificities and tensions between urban and rural areas, the challenges of strengthening municipal spheres within authoritarian contexts, and even the definition of “city” itself.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ For more details on those debates see Ortiz Flores, Nehls & Zárate (2008).

Internal and external challenges

At the same time, and as a direct participant and first-hand witness of several of these interactions, it became clear to me that the challenges the urban movements were facing were both “internal” and “external”. To the difficulties of articulating common agendas across different actors and scales, at least another layer was added by the broad encounters offered at the WSF. Paradoxically, despite its best intentions, and the inclusion of the so-called “convergences” as an important part of the programme, the thematic and physical architecture of the WSF maintained many of the sectorial approaches prevalent in conventional institutional and academic landscapes (i.e., different tents or facilities for different sectors/themes, sometimes kilometres away from each other). As such, urban movements were not only separated from but on many occasions somehow invisibilized among other fundamental struggles including overarching and crosscutting issues such as international trade regulation, militarization, and peace. At the same time, the *campesino*, Indigenous, feminist, and human rights movements had their own spaces for debate and processes of articulation, that in general did not include considerations of the urban dimensions or of the urban movements engaged in similar demands and proposals. Additionally, among the tens of thousands of participants and the hundreds of overlapping events squeezed within a week at a given WSF, the organizations promoting the right to the city barely had time to connect beyond their own circles.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ A concrete example might help to illustrate the scope and significance of these challenges. One of the explicit efforts to articulate more-than-urban movements was the initiative put forward by the Habitat International Coalition (HIC), FIAN and other international networks in terms of establishing some intentional dialogues with *La Vía Campesina*, given the parallel elaboration of the World Charter for the Right to the City and the Declaration of the Rights of Peasants (the basis for an international legal instrument adopted by the United Nations in December 2018 (available at <https://viacampesina.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/UN-Delcaration-on-Peasants-Rights-Dec-2018-EN.pdf>). Human rights, social justice and agrarian/urban reforms opposing neoliberal globalization, privatization, mega-projects, land grabbing, displacement and criminalization of social protest were some of the key shared concerns and

In a parallel but certainly related development, the municipalist movement linked to these debates can also be seen as a process of articulation and differentiation. Organized a few days before the annual editions of the WSF (particularly of those held in Porto Alegre) as something logistically separated but politically connected, the Local Authorities Forum (*Foro de Autoridades Locales-FAL*) was a space for progressive mayors and governments to meet and discuss common agendas and share initiatives, including dialogues and alliances with social movements. One concrete result of these exchanges that mentions the right to the city is the Global Charter Agenda for Human Rights in the City (2011),¹¹⁰ an effort to articulate some principles to guide specific commitments and local policies. The main promoter behind that document was the United Cities and Local Governments network (UCLG), which at the time was becoming the biggest organization of its kind world-wide.¹¹¹ Although representing a politically diverse membership not free of visible tensions and contradictions,¹¹² it was clear that this signaled an important opening to work closely with civil society associations and to incorporate demands and proposals arising from social justice movements.

proposals among organizations and movements from both the global South and the global North. Despite some fruitful debates and joint initiatives—including the possibility of having a common “preamble” for the two documents, as well as the documentation of cases for an International Popular Tribunal on Evictions held in several WSF and WUF editions, such as in Dakar in 2011 and Napoli in 2012—each process continued its own way, although not totally disconnected.

¹¹⁰ This document, conceived as a commitment from local government to public policies and instruments that progressively guarantee human rights, is currently under revision at the occasion of its tenth anniversary (full text available at <https://www.uclg-cisd.org/en/right-to-the-city/world-charter-agenda>). A series of political debates and pedagogical activities are being planned, with participation of civil society organizations and networks such as the Global Platform for the Right to the City.

¹¹¹ Established in 2004, UCLG is the result of the fusion of two pre-existing global networks: the International Union of Local Authorities (dating back to 1913) and the United Towns Organization (founded in 1957). More details available at <https://www.uclg.org/en/centenary>

¹¹² From very progressive mayors like the ones from Barcelona or Rosario (Argentina) to extremely conservative and problematic ones, like those from Istanbul or Guangzhou (China).

Having had the opportunity to accompany these processes for the past two decades, I can notice this tendency has not only been maintained but also deepened, in fact provoking a substantive shift in both discourses and practices. Since then, UCLG has strengthened a territorial and more integral perspective on human rights, as well as discussed central components of the transformative agenda for the right to the city such as the social function of land and property, the expanded notion of citizenship (particularly in the context of migrants and refugee's crisis) and the need to strengthen the tools not just for "participatory" but direct (radical) democracy in a more systematic way. Despite some internal resistance,¹¹³ it could be said that the right to the city seems to have won a prominent place within the organization's work, with one of its five political councils dedicated to the issue and now regular exercises of dialogue and "co-creation" with civil society networks as a crucial partner in pushing forward the municipalist agenda (combining a "#listen to cities" and "#cities are listening" strategy).¹¹⁴ For their part, the right to the city movements have certainly re-affirmed the relevance of decentralization and devolution processes —as the rights *of* the cities— in fulfilling their goals.

The physical localization of the UCLG headquarters and global secretariat in Barcelona seems to have also had a major impact in making this shift possible. Since the election of Ada Colau as Mayor in 2015, the city has been playing a highly noticeable role

¹¹³ Arising not only from more conservative and private-sector oriented members, but also from those engaged in more traditional (liberal), sectorial and thematic approaches to human rights.

¹¹⁴ See <https://www.cglu.org/en/policy-councils> and recent initiatives such as the elaboration of policy papers for the UCLG Congress (Durban, November 2019) <https://www.cglu.org/en/node/3057> and multi-sectoral, virtual roundtables with United Nations Special Rapporteurs covering different rights in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic <https://www.cglu.org/en/issues/live-learning-experience-beyondtheoutbreak> It is worth mentioning that in recent debates the organization seems to be embracing a strong political discourse revolving around the "localization" of human rights, the centrality of care and the reconstitution of the commons. In parallel, it seems to be putting considerable effort in promoting a "feminist municipalist movement" (<https://www.uclg.org/en/media/news/feminist-municipal-movement-needs-put-care-center-call-full-involvement-women-public-life>).

in both positioning these and other progressive elements and representing the organization with strong feminist and socially grounded discourses at international events and policy discussions. Particularly relevant in this sense is the joint participation from the right to the city and (new) municipalist movements at both “invited” and “invented” spaces (Miraftab, 2009) within the preparatory process of the third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (known as Habitat III), and the negotiation of its outcome document, the New Urban Agenda (2016).¹¹⁵ Well aware of the formal limitations to their meaningful engagement in a political space dominated by nation-states, bureaucratic procedures and complicated diplomatic compromises, international networks representing local/regional governments and civil society organizations quickly realized the need for building a common front to expand the contents of the debates and the voices allowed in it. Without losing their differentiated character, they worked out an inside/outside strategy to be able to create a broader public sphere and develop joint proposals that would, at the same, time deepen their own understanding of what I call a tridimensional narrative-in-practice, including human rights *in* the city, the rights *of* the cities and the right *to* the city, as elaborated below.

Last but not least, the so-called Fearless Cities summit also originated from Barcelona in 2017, as a separate but nevertheless connected initiative to articulate the wave of new municipalist governments run by citizen parties and supported by grassroots

¹¹⁵ Detailed information and materials arising from official and self-organized activities linked to that process are available at <https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/preparatory-process/> and <https://www.hic-net.org/hic-compilation-on-habitat-iii/>. The Manifesto of Local Governments for the Right to Housing and the Right to the City, endorsed by forty municipalities and metropolitan areas, and jointly presented by progressive mayors and civil society organizations at the United Nations Assembly in July 2018, is considered an important follow-up (www.citiesforhousing.org).

organizations and progressive urban movements.¹¹⁶ Conceived in the midst of the ascendance of the extreme right in different regions, the commitment was “to build global networks of solidarity and hope from the bottom up” (Fearless Cities website). As the main internationalist project of *Barcelona en Comú*, the feminization of politics and the radicalization of democracy appear as clear common objectives on the agenda. Although not all of them necessarily self-identified as part of the municipalist movement, the gatherings have brought together local communities (an intentional mixture of social organizations, neighbourhood associations and activists/public servants) that are being proclaimed “sanctuaries” for migrants and refugees; “brave” and “rebel” cities that denounce the abuses of transnational speculative lobbies and oppose national or international austerity agendas; “free” from mining, fracking and other extractive practices that plunder territories and communities; overall, “caring” cities that put the needs and rights of people and everyday life at the core of their ethics and practice.

Towards urban decolonial horizons?

The de-colonial option starts from narrating a silenced history, the history of the formation and transformation of the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo, 2011, p. 40).

... the properly cynical temptation of reducing it [*equaliberté*] to a mere illusion that conceals a different actuality should be resisted (...) Much more interesting is the opposite process, in which something that was originally an ideological edifice imposed by colonizers is all of a sudden taken over by their subjects as a means to articulate their ‘authentic’ grievances (Žižek, 2005, p. 130).

¹¹⁶ According to the information available in its website (<http://fearlesscities.com/>), six editions of the Summit were held between 2018 and 2019. Despite efforts to incorporate more representation from other regions, the focus has so far been on mobilizations in Europe, North America, and Latin America. Considering the pandemic restrictions, the Fearless Cities 2021 was organized by *Barcelona en Comú* as a virtual event in early July. The week-long programme included central issues for the municipalist movement, such as the feminization of politics, housing rights and energy transition, as well as specific sessions on more recently incorporated concerns around antiracist organizing and basic income policies. All recordings can be accessed at <https://fearlesscities.com/en/programme>.

At this point, the insights offered by a decolonial perspective can help to identify gaps and shortcomings, but also the potential for (urban) emancipatory action. The analysis so far has shown that more-than-liberal, contextual, and contested notions of human rights, democracy and citizenship are pivotal elements in the narratives and practices put forward by the right to the city and new municipalist movements. Although already critically revised and expanded from other-than-western and place-based Indigenous and feminist perspectives, it is clear that they carry a long-standing, constitutive attachment to coloniality, modernity and capitalism, as intertwined and mutually reinforcing systems of domination, exploitation and oppression with multiple ontological, epistemological and political implications. From within these premises, crucial questions arise: is it possible to build transformative narratives and practices from within those limited, inherited frameworks? To what extent are these transformative (urban) agendas expanding decolonial horizons? What are their main contributions and limitations?¹¹⁷

In general terms, scholars from different backgrounds agree upon the centrality of human rights agendas—including their linkages with notions of radicalized democracy and expanded citizenship—as critical tools to both understand the main tensions at the heart of the modern paradigm,¹¹⁸ as well as to broaden the field of the political (Balibar, 2004; Fregoso, 2014; Mignolo, 2009; Panikkar, 1982; Rancière, 2004; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010; Said, 1993; Santos, 2008, 2019). From pro-independence, anti-colonial and anti-dictatorships civil rights and radical Black movements, together with feminist and Indigenous mobilizations, since the 1960s multiple and massive social struggles have been

¹¹⁷ Somehow similar questions are addressed in the PhD dissertation of García Chueca (2018) for the case of the right to the city and cultural movements in Brazil.

¹¹⁸ Identified by Santos in terms of social regulation versus social emancipation, state versus civil society, and/or nation-states versus globalization (Santos, 2008, pp. 3-5).

framed in terms of asserting rights as a way to redistribute power and resources, both within and between societies. Particularly since the fall of the Berlin wall in the late 1980s and the consecutive shaking up of socialist programmes, for some analysts “human rights have become the language of progressive politics” (Santos, 2008, p. 3). Beyond a doubt, there is widespread evidence that during the past decades struggles to reassert, re-signify, and expand political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights of individuals, groups and communities have gained momentum across the globe at national and international levels. The right to the city and new municipalist movements are certainly part of this trajectory. In the context of the articulations facilitated and inspired by the WSF, it is important to highlight that a shared narrative around “rights” was the practical tool to explicitly denounce the material and symbolic impacts of neoliberal globalization and to galvanize a wide spectrum of struggles against the commodification of life, while supporting experimentation around collective alternatives (from land, water, food and housing, to education, media and digital technologies, to mention but a few).

However, taken from a decolonial perspective, the shortcomings of the modern(liberal)/colonial(capitalist) “matrix of power” within which human rights are historically, conceptually and politically inscribed become evident (Mignolo, 2011).¹¹⁹ As originally formulated more than two centuries ago during the French and American Revolutions, the rights of “man” and “the citizen” were conceived as severely constrained to (white) male individuals, property owners and living under the jurisdiction of a particular nation-state. These extremely limited and exclusionary premises and arrangements were

¹¹⁹ Mignolo (2011) understands that power as expressed in “four interrelated domains of practices and arguments” including the control over subjectivities, authority, economy, and knowledge, made possible by “two pillars of enunciation”: racism and patriarchy (Mignolo, 2011, pp. 27-29).

still notably present in the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by United Nations in 1948.¹²⁰ Despite alleged efforts to “consider and reflect different cultural and legal backgrounds”, and important references to gender equality and human dignity beyond national boundaries, the language was very much one of a generic and universal masculine subject (man, brotherhood, him/his), foregrounding civic and political rights (revolving mostly around individual freedoms, property, privacy and security). It then comes as no surprise that subsequent international instruments have been focusing on developing the specific contents and related obligations linked to the rights of particular groups (women, children, Indigenous Peoples, so on and so forth) as well as social, economic, and cultural rights, with particular emphasis on collective rights (such as the right to peace, the so-called right to development and the ongoing discussion on environmental rights).¹²¹

Aware of this challenging and complicated framework, Santos (2008) provocatively asks “whether the vocabulary or the script of human rights is so crowded with hegemonic meanings as to exclude the possibility of counter-hegemonic meanings” (p. 23). A prominent participant at many World Social Forums and close supporter of social movements in different regions, in his analysis post-colonial formulations will necessarily have to be framed as part of intercultural dialogues based on the recognition/production of multiple knowledges. Understanding it as “first and foremost and epistemological task”, the author embarks on an “exercise in *retrospective* radical imagination” to identify some

¹²⁰ Critically tracing that genealogy to the Spanish conquest of the Americas and the need to justify the expropriation of Indigenous lands, Mignolo asserts that “[t]he historical and colonial foundation of international law was at the same time the foundation of *rights and racism*” (Mignolo, 2011, p. 30, italics in the original).

¹²¹ For a discussion on Indigenous Peoples, multicultural citizenship and the bridging of individual and collective rights see Holder & Cornthassel (2002).

of the crucial dimensions of such alternative politics of rights for emancipatory projects (Santos, 2008, p. 29, emphasis added). Interestingly enough for my research purposes, three of the six main “intercultural and post-imperial human rights” that Santos proposes are closely related and in fact central to the transformative agendas of the right to the city and the new municipalist movements. In his terms, these include: “the right to organize and participate in the creation of rights”, “the right to self-determination”; and “the right to solidarity-oriented transformation of the right to property” (Santos, 2008, pp. 30-34).¹²²

As discussed in the previous chapters, the social function of land, use value over the exchange value, and the recognition and promotion of different tenure arrangements (from tenants and cooperatives, to other collective and traditional forms);¹²³ the centrality of autonomy (from individuals and groups to cities understood as political communities, i.e. municipalities); and the social and expansive nature of the formulation of rights, are all crucial features in the political and programmatic agendas of these movements, from Mexico City, Barcelona and beyond. Moreover, I argue that it is precisely because they are conscious of several of the limitations imposed by the inherited modern/colonial framework that they are putting forward different but interconnected strategies at the epistemological and political level. This thesis has shown how those movements have been

¹²² It is interesting to note that Santos’s prolific work on *juridical pluralism* seems to have taken inspiration from his early engagement with the socio-political processes in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro in the early 1970s (see Santos, 2019). In his list of “intercultural and post-imperial human rights”, the author also identifies the right to knowledge (framed as epistemologies of the south) and “the right to grant rights to entities incapable of bearing duties, namely nature and future generations” (Santos, 2019, pp. 29-32). As discussed in this thesis, those are also important features for the right to the city and the new municipalist movements, although the “rights of nature” (or the rights of Mother Earth, la *Pachamama*) are still to be more prominently included in their agendas.

¹²³ In an effort to de-center private property, civil society organizations and social movements have worked with the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, Raquel Rolnik, in a series of analysis and recommendations that point simultaneously to the need to promoted alternative (traditional and collective, cooperative and rental) tenure forms, while at the same time “un-packing” the bundle of entitlements and rights that rest upon private property —introducing the notion of “non-discrimination on the basis of tenure”. For more details see Reports A/HRC/25/54 (2013), A/68/289 (2013) and A/HRC/22/46 (2012).

recuperating and (re)creating new concepts and narratives to confront the limitations of one-world knowledge (Rojas, 2007, 2016), experimenting with autonomous practices that overcome the limitations of institutions and building alliances to challenge sectarianism and sectorial approaches.

The right to (transform) the city: A tridimensional narrative-in-practice

As part of the decades-long pedagogical-political processes of articulation and differentiation described in this thesis, the collective and iterative, theoretical and practical formulation of the right to (transform) the city has led to significant contributions that can be summarized in an analytical framework that distinguishes: a) the rights *in* the city; b) the rights *of* the cities; and, c) the right *to* the city (intentional use of singular and plural in each formulation) (Image 7).¹²⁴

- a) The rights *in* the city: the focus on the combined spatial dimensions of everyday life not only highlights the collective dimension of rights, but it also brings forward the concreteness of their (much spoken but rarely fully grasped) indivisibility and interdependence from a territorial approach. For every person knows that on a daily basis they need to access housing and basic services (including water and sanitation, energy, waste collection, transportation), and that those physical/material elements are inextricably linked with access to food, health, education, jobs, culture, recreation and civil and political rights. Not only does the right to the city “localize” (local governments and institutions responsibilities) and “make spatial sense” of already recognized

¹²⁴ To my mind they represent not only different elements combined in a common vision and guidance for action, but importantly so, they could also potentially signal relevant threads for articulation and strategic alliances with other movements engaged in emancipatory politics.

rights;¹²⁵ it also functions as a platform from which to mobilize and claim new ones — such as the right to public spaces, active and multi-modal transportation and digital rights now included in the Mexico City Constitution (2017). At the same time, and perhaps even more significantly, this vision helps us to see self-organized and transformative processes, like the social production of habitat or the collective management of the commons, as part of prefigurative exercises in fulfilling needs and guaranteeing rights that not solely rely upon and go beyond the (liberal) state.

- b) The rights *of* the cities: this dimension corresponds to the need to recognize and strengthen a local political community *vis-à-vis* national governments, international agencies, and multilateral institutions, as well as increasingly powerful, transnational economic and financial actors. Cities and regions are aware of the severe socio-spatial challenges that interconnected crisis of inequality, violence, migration, and climate change entail for them. They also know the limited voice they have at global agenda-setting arenas, despite the multiple and very concrete impacts they have at the local level. Amidst the limitations and contradictions of process of devolution and decentralization, problematically framed under neoliberal globalization and so-called structural adjustment, municipalities are claiming a bigger and more just share of public resources and institutional capabilities.¹²⁶ They see themselves as autonomous but not isolated entities centered around guaranteeing adequate living conditions for all of their

¹²⁵ As stated in both the World Charter (2005) and the Mexico City Charter (2010), the right to the city is based on all the internationally sanctioned human rights (individual and collective) and sees them as a necessary framework for all public policy and budget allocation (not just human rights programmes). Moreover, they signal formal, long-term commitments (beyond electoral and government's particular agendas), including the obligations to respect, protect and guarantee, the maximum of available resources, non-retrogression and the priority on marginalized individuals, groups and communities.

¹²⁶ See for example the *Cities for adequate housing. Municipalist Declaration of Local Governments for the Right to Housing and the Right to the City* (2018) presented at the United Nations High Level Political Forum held in New York.

inhabitants and the radicalization of democracy, with permanent mechanisms for shared decision-making, co-creation (citizen's participation in planning and management of the territory) and accountability. In other words, self-sufficient, but diverse and interconnected communities, where the notion of the "public" is pushed beyond the governmental sphere and necessarily linked to the collective management of the commons.

- c) The right *to* the city: as mentioned above, this peculiar right includes the previous two dimensions but also adds some important elements. Beyond the spatial and expanded approach to rights and democracy, it includes fundamental principles in order not only to implement but to radicalize that agenda from a necessarily collective perspective: the social function of land, property, and territory; the social production of habitat and a solidarity economy; and the responsible management of the commons. Moreover, it can be argued that this more-than-liberal right is at not only "a cry and a demand" but a political commitment to transform societies and territories (Lefebvre, 1968/1996, p. 158). Although not frequently presented as such in an explicit way,¹²⁷ it is clear to me that the motivation and intention of these principles strongly connects with non-capitalist worldviews such as the Andean *sumak kawsay* ("good living" in Quechua) and the *suma qamaña* ("living well" in Aymara).

¹²⁷ For some articles discussing the *buen vivir* in the urban areas and the potential connection with the right to the city see Martínez, (2013), Rodríguez Ibáñez (2013) and Zárate (2011).

Image 7: The right to (transform) the city: A tridimensional narrative-in-practice

Dimensions	Rights <i>in</i> the city	Rights <i>of</i> the city	Right <i>to</i> the city
Key strategies	Territorialized rights	Radicalized democracy	De-commodified socio-spatial relations
Key components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights - Individual and collective rights (greater attention to the later) - New rights (public space, digital technologies, rights of nature, etc.) - Nexus between global agendas/commitments and local policies - Expanded notion of citizenship (not linked to national/legal status but to place of residence) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Autonomy and self-determination (not in isolation but as part of socio-political networks) - Redistribution of political-economic power - Direct democracy - Feminization of politics - Public-community partnerships - Regulation of the market (including transnational corporations) - Seat at the table (national/international decision-making spaces) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social function of land/property (use value) - Social production of habitat - Social and solidarity economy - (Re)defined and (re)claimed commons - Ecological/regional perspective (beyond administrative boundaries) - Community-based democratic planning - Urban law (de-centring private property)
Core values	<p><i>Autogestión</i> Ethics of care Relationality Everyday life Proximity Territory</p>		

Source: elaborated by author, 2021.

Although each of these dimensions has been discussed by academics, only few have put them into genuine conversation¹²⁸ and, to my knowledge, they have so far not been taken together as I propose in the concept of a tridimensional narrative-in-practice. As I see them, many of these elements signal the possibilities of expanding and deepening a decolonial approach in urban movements, as well as the relevance of Indigenous material, symbolic and political contributions for decolonizing urban settings. Overall, the de/non-commodification of the commons and the emphasis on self-determination and collective governance are crucial political-economic components that the right to the city and the new municipalism movements share with Indigenous philosophies.

¹²⁸ Such as in the work of Attoh (2011), García Chueca (2018), Marcuse (2009) or Ugalde (2015). I must make clear that this formulation is certainly inspired by my direct engagement with many of the organizations and processes described in this thesis. As stated in the Introduction, for the past two decades I have benefited from multiple exchanges and dialogues with a wide range of activists, professionals, academics and public officials through advocacy and pedagogical initiatives at different scales. Many reflections and arguments that I present here have certainly been shaped through such interactions.

Concluding remarks

The decolonial critique can of course be grounded in different dimensions and take on different forms. Beyond the (de/re)construction of rights outlined above, it is relevant to consider additional perspectives that focus on the tensions and limitations of key concepts that run through this thesis, including the city, the commons and (radical) democracy. Regarding the first one, it is important to highlight that, as many scholars keep pointing out, the urban has been constituted as a material, political and symbolic entity not just different from the countryside but actively as non-Indigenous and even anti-Indigenous, in a process of reconfiguration and re-signification that continues to the present day (Blatman-Thomas & Porter, 2018; Blomley, 2004, 2017; Dorries, Hugil & Tomiak, 2019; Edmonds, 2010; Tomiak 2016, 2017; Tomiak, McCreary, Hugill, Henry & Dorries, 2019). Particularly, but not only, in (settler)colonial contexts, this translates into violent racist and gendered discourses, institutions and practices that, disguised under the misleading labels of “progress” and “development”, continue to invisibilize, exploit and segregate spaces, bodies and subjectivities. Based on these premises, authors like Tomiak (2011) stress the relevance of cities as “crucial sites of decolonization”, providing a detailed discussion of multi-scalar strategies put forward by Indigenous Peoples in Ottawa and Winnipeg to reclaim rights, self-determination, and spatial justice, using a right to (be in) the city framework (p. 7).

Tightly entangled with issues of belonging are definitions over ownership, as part of the key *dispositifs*¹²⁹ sustaining the overlapping structures of power-knowledge relations

¹²⁹ As formulated by Michel Foucault.

and hierarchical classifications in societies. Dispossession and relocation of communities is at the basis of this unrooting process, with reallocation of land and the reification of private property as a central dynamic restructuring society through urban planning and law (Blomley, 2004, 2017). In these analyses, “racial regimes of ownership” (Bhandar, 2018) are necessarily linked to broader “racialized dichotomies” (Tomiak, 2017) that artificially divide and separate urban/non-urban, Indigenous/non-Indigenous, propertied/property-less.¹³⁰ As shown in previous chapters, and well aware of these profoundly damaging entanglements, at the core of the right to the city and new municipalist agendas being claimed and implemented in Mexico City, Barcelona and beyond is a categorical rejection of evictions and displacements as well as an explicit commitment to (re)create and promote alternative and collective tenure forms (i.e. cooperatives, community land trusts, and other non-profit and public options) together with the promotion of an *urban law* (linked to the justice system and regulations) not attached to private property, and the systematic denouncing of and opposition to discrimination based on tenure. In other words, the preeminence of the use value over the exchange value already identified by Lefebvre, following Marx, at the core of his formulation of the right to the city.

However, and this connects with the second element mentioned above (the commons), from a decolonial lens these processes still present some significant omissions and problematic tensions. If concerns over racial (in)justice and Indigenous Peoples’ dispossession and self-determination are certainly not absent from these agendas, it is clear that they are far from being systematically or sufficiently taken into consideration when

¹³⁰ Linked to linear conceptualizations of time and flat interpretations of space, these crucial elements are part of the objectification of reality that relies on active ontological, epistemological, and political procedures of erasure —or what Santos (2004) has called the “production of absences”.

discussing alternative and collective land and housing arrangements in urban settings.¹³¹ Taking the example of the *Occupy* movement within a North American context, authors like Coulthard (2014) and Tuck & Yang (2012) have eloquently signaled the harming impacts that even well-intentioned and social justice initiatives can have when racial formations and multi-layered and mutually reinforced regimes of power remain occluded. In a similar direction, Harvey (2011, 2012) has also expressed warnings around contradictory aspects of projects promoting the commons that are oblivious of Indigenous presence and rights, while other authors have called upon explicitly anti-racist and anti-capitalist initiatives (Bledsoe, McCreary & Wright, 2020) that would have to be mindful of more-than-human relations and grounded practices of “co-resistance through an ethic of relational accountability” to land and peoples (Daigle & Ramírez, 2019).¹³²

In the Latin American context, the experimentations and theoretical debates around the commons present an explicitly feminist character. Questioning the constitutive and far reaching productive/reproductive, public/private, male/female modern/colonial/capitalist divides, authors like Gutiérrez Aguilar (2015), together with Navarro Trujillo and Linsalata (2016), Quiroga Díaz and Gago (2014, 2017), and Zibechi (2008) center the role of the *entramados comunitarios* in protecting and defending life against multifaceted and widespread violence and exploitation. Beyond urban/non-urban binaries, they have

¹³¹ Some of the compelling exceptions to which I am more familiar with include the *Barrio Intercultural* promoted by Mapuche and *metizxs* organizations in San Martín de los Andes in Argentina; and a cooperative housing project for Afro-Uruguayan women in the central area of Montevideo, as a material and symbolic restitution of land and neighbourhoods to centuries-long displaced and discriminated against communities. Additionally, it is interesting to note that current initiatives by the Global Platform for the Right to the City are incorporating a more explicit anti-racist, decolonial and anti-patriarchal approach (see for example the collective elaboration of thematic papers/policy recommendations and the recent publication with the *Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales* (CLACSO) covering some of these topics.

¹³² Interestingly, Indigenous Peoples’ principle of “radical hospitality” (i.e., “no bans on stolen lands” and welcoming refugees) referred by Daigle & Ramírez (2019, citing Coulthard) strongly resonates with the ethical-political commitments of the so-called sanctuary cities, within and beyond the (new) municipalist movement (Daigle & Ramírez, 2019, pp. 81-82).

identified the interruption of the processes of profit accumulation and the disobedience of the state-related rules of political representation as key threads that connect multiple struggles under neoliberal globalization. Concerns over the (re)appropriation and (re)distribution of resources and socially produced wealth based on collective decision-making processes are central part of the “feminization of politics” that puts care and reproduction at the core of a *popular* counter-power. Despite the strong resonances of these approaches with the right to the city and the new municipalist agendas, the cross-references in both directions seem still limited to me; I suggest that this would represent an extremely fertile terrain for more systematic conceptual and political explorations.

Finally, the radicalization of democracy may also prove limited when considering the possibilities of emancipation for traditionally oppressed and marginalized communities. In what I consider an important contribution to this debate, Conway and Singh (2011) critically engage with the work of Laclau and Mouffe on this field as a “post-Marxist reformulation of the socialist project” that, despite its opposition to the liberal/capitalist dogma, remains nevertheless trapped in a modern/colonial framework (Conway & Singh, 2011, p. 692). Privileged notions within this tradition of political theory—such as “hegemony” and the centrality of the nation-state as the main site for struggles on legitimacy—enter in their analysis under serious scrutinizing from a subaltern, social movements perspective. Building on the work on Esteva and Prakash from Mexico and India respectively, these authors conceptualize Indigenous, place-based, and bottom-up practices, together with “a politics of affinity” and “the articulation of struggles across difference” crystallizing at the WSF dynamics as multiple as effective paths for reclaiming and re-signifying democracy not only as separated from the liberal tradition but as

explicitly anti-capitalist (Conway and Sing, 2011, p. 698-699, quoting Escobar). Although under different names, from their perspective what is commonly at stake are principles and institutions for self-determination, autonomy, and collective governance, grounded in communal “land-based imaginaries” that defend livelihoods and ways of life.

Once again, while the commonalities of these postulates with the right to the city and the new municipalist movements are possible to identify, relevant shortcomings and gaps in their decolonial potential are also evident. Even if in the case of Mexico City both the participation of Indigenous organizations in the right to the city movement and the formal recognition of Indigenous institutions and practices (like the *usos y costumbres* regarding several socio-political arrangements in the *pueblos* that predate the Spanish conquest and the nation-state) are important features, I would argue that they have not been systematically incorporated in the debates and experimentation as part of an explicit decolonial approach. Similarly, the prominent concern of the new municipalist movement to radicalize democracy by transforming both the contents and forms of politics and strengthening direct action at the local level, if not explicitly attached to decolonial and anti-racist agendas, can further dispossess and continue to harm traditionally marginalized groups. By engaging more intentionally and actively with these and other “absences” and “emergences” (Santos, 2004), the right to the city and the new municipalist movements could better ensure their scope and relevance as transformative and emancipatory agendas for the twenty first century.

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Appendix: Relevant “invited” and “invented” spaces as part of processes of articulation (and differentiation) and collective narrative-building on the right to the city (2001-2016)

Year	“Invited” spaces	“Invented” spaces	Related documents
2001		World Social Forum (Porto Alegre)	City’s Statute (Brazil)
2002		World Social Forum (Porto Alegre)	
2003		World Social Forum (Porto Alegre)	World Charter for the Right to the City - Draft
2004	UN-Habitat World Urban Forum (Barcelona)	Latin American Social Forum (Quito) International Dialogues and Workshop (Barcelona) World Social Forum (Mumbai)	World Charter for the Right to the City - Draft Latin American Charter for Women’s Right to the City
2005		World Social Forum (Porto Alegre)	World Charter for the Right to the City
2006	UN-Habitat World Urban Forum (Vancouver)	Latin American Social Forum (Caracas)	
2007		World Social Forum (Nairobi)	
2008		World Social Forum (Mexico City) UCLG Summit (Mexico City)	Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City - Draft
2009		World Social Forum (Belem do Pará) UCLG Summit (Belem do Pará) International Workshop (Quito)	Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City - Draft
2010	UN-Habitat World Urban Forum (Rio de Janeiro)	Urban Social Forum (Rio de Janeiro) UCLG Congress (Mexico City)	Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City - Draft

Appendix: Relevant “invited” and “invented” spaces as part of processes of articulation (and differentiation) and collective narrative-building on the right to the city (2001-2016)

2011		World Social Forum (Dakar) UCLG Summit (Dakar)	UCLG Charter-Agenda on Human Rights in the City
2012	UN-Habitat World Urban Forum (Naples) UN II Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro)	Urban Social Forum (Naples) People’s Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro) UCLG Summit (Saint Denis)	UCLG Charter-Agenda on Human Rights in the City
2013		World Social Forum (Tunis) UCLG Summit (Tunis) and UCLG Congress (Rabat) Human Rights Cities Forum (Gwangju)	
2014	UN-Habitat World Urban Forum (Medellín)	Urban Social Forum (Medellín) UCLG Summit (Medellín) Human Rights Cities Forum (Gwangju)	Gwangju Guiding Principles for Human Rights Cities
2015		World Social Forum (Tunis) UCLG Summit (Mexico City) Human Rights Cities Forum (Gwangju)	
2016	UN-Habitat III (Quito)	Alternative Habitat III Summits (Quito) World Social Forum (Montreal) UCLG Congress (Bogotá)	UN New Urban Agenda

Source: elaborated by author, 2021.