# The New Municipal Movements

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**Revolutionary Potential**

Much more than simply a strategy for local governance, radical municipalism is emerging as a path to social freedom and democracy beyond the state.

Illustration by
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Just a short time ago, the idea of the United States electing real estate mogul Donald Trump to the presidency seemed almost unthinkable. Yet now that this impossible proposition has come to pass, a new space has opened for visionary thinking. If electing Donald Trump is indeed possible, what other impossibilities might be realized?

To date, popular opposition to Trump has been expressed largely through mass demonstrations and street protests. On the day of Trump's inauguration, an estimated 2.9 million people marched throughout dozens of US cities. These watershed moments, such as the Women's March or the March for Science, present people with much-needed opportunities to feel catharsis, express solidarity and recognize shared values. Yet, as protests, they are inherently limited. Specifically, they fail to bring about a program for the deep institutional transformation that our society so desperately needs.

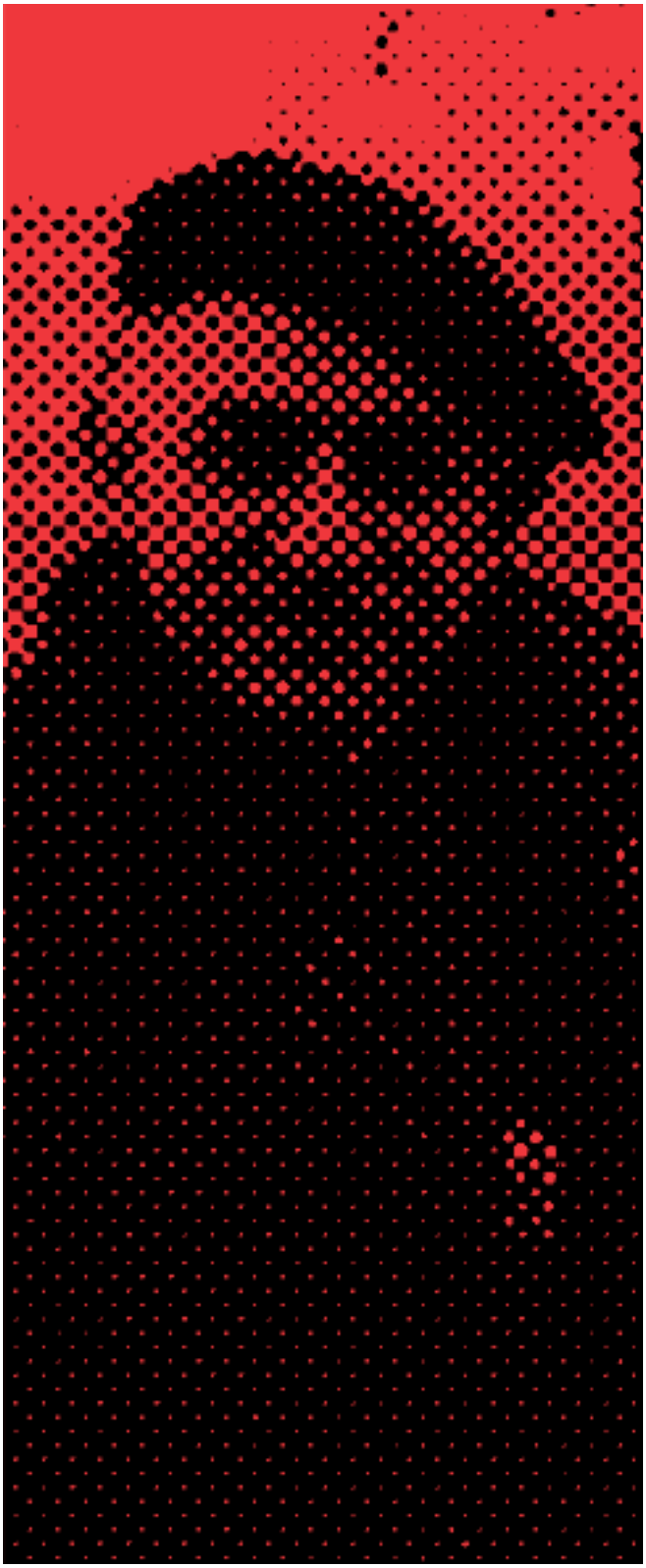
Beneath highly visible mobilizations, grassroots and municipal forms of opposition to Trump are also taking shape. Under the banner of "sanctuary cities," community-based organizations, faith groups, legal advocates, workers' centers and engaged citizens have been setting up crisis networks to support immigrant families living under the threat of deportation. These projects, structured largely on a neighborhood-to-neighborhood basis, challenge dominant assumptions about political participation and raise the crucial question of what it really should mean to be a citizen.

Meanwhile, mayors and city officials have surfaced as some of Trump's most vocal opponents. This past June, nearly 300 mayors, including nine of the ten largest cities in America, disobeyed the president's wishes and re-committed to the Paris Climate Accord. Whether these declarations amount to genuine acts of political defiance or merely symbolic gestures by local elites looking to advance their careers is tangential. What matters is that during a period of unprecedented political turmoil people are calling upon local officials to act on behalf of their communities — regardless of citizenship — rather than according to the wishes of a far-right regime. They are looking to their own municipalities as sites of grounded political action and moral authority.

## The Municipalist Alternative

In the midst of this milieu, a small constellation of civic platforms have emerged with the purpose of transforming how US cities and municipalities are actually run. Blurring the lines between social movement and local governance, these municipalist experiments organize on the basis of existing municipalities or districts, demanding socially just and ecological solutions to issues that concern the community as a whole. Yet their common agenda extends far beyond electing progressive parties to local office. Patiently, through a combination of political education, grassroots mobilization and reform, municipalists seek to place decision-making power back in the hands of citizens. Municipalism is not simply a new strategy for local governance, but rather is a path to social freedom and stateless democracy.

The term "municipalism" itself derives from "libertarian municipalism," coined during the 1980s by social theorist and philosopher Murray Bookchin. By claiming the label "libertarian," Bookchin invoked its original meaning from nineteenth-century anarchism. In his view, essential concepts like "liberty" and "freedom" had been wrongly subverted and appropriated by the right wing, and it was time for leftists to reclaim them. Nonetheless, the label "libertarian" has been dropped by many of the new municipal experiments. Most recently, the Catalan citizen's platform Barcelona en Comú (Barcelona



in Common) has popularized municipalism as part of its political project in Catalonia, Spain. Their version of municipalism also ties closely to the theory and praxis of the commons, which they marshal to defend the city against runaway tourism and urban development.

Municipalism is distinguished by its insistence that the underlying problem with society is our disempowerment. Capitalism and the state not only cause extraordinary material suffering and inequality, they also rob us of the ability to play a meaningful role in our own lives and communities. By seizing the power to make decisions, they deprive us of our own humanity and sense of purpose — they deprive us of meaning.

The solution, as municipalists see it, is direct democracy. To achieve this, we can cultivate the new society within the shell of the old by eroding the state's popular legitimacy and dissolving its power into face-to-face people's assemblies and confederations. This means having faith that people are intelligent and want things to change. In Bookchin's words, libertarian municipalism "presupposes a genuine democratic desire by people to arrest the growing powers of the nation state." People can, and ought, to be the experts regarding their own needs.

Not all movements that align with a municipalist program refer to themselves as such. For example, the Kurdish freedom movement advocates a very similar model under the term "democratic confederalism." Bookchin himself later adopted the label "communalism" to highlight the affinity between his views and the 1871 Paris Commune. Virtually every region and culture of the world is fertile with some historical legacy of popular assemblies, tribal democracy or stateless self-governance. The question is how do we revive those legacies and use them to erode the dominance of capitalism and the state over the rest of society.

## The Role of Cities

Municipalities, towns, villages, city wards and neighborhoods provide the actual physical scale at which such an empowering politics can flourish. Historically, cities have drawn people together, facilitating diversity by encouraging cross-cultural interaction. This inherent feature infuses cities with a humanistic sensibility — and by extension also with radical potential. As Hannah Arendt put it, "politics is based on the fact of human plurality." Cities weave many different kinds of people together into a rich tapestry of everyday life.

Fear and distrust of cities has been a central pillar of Trump's far-right movement. The Trumpists are afraid of immigrants, black people and those who play with gender norms. They fear elites, political domination and the economic precarity that ruthlessly dazzling cities represent. A whole gamut of caricatures are arranged in one foreboding image of a decadent cosmopolitanism.

These antagonisms are all the worse for the stark inequality found in major metropolitan areas. "Gentrification" comes nowhere close to describing the mass internal displacement taking place throughout the US. In San Francisco, a small, modest home costs about $3.5 to 4 million; simple one-bedroom apartments range from $3,500 to $15,000 per month to rent. Beneath the shimmering towers of tech billionaires, tent villages wedge precariously between the concrete pillars of highway underpasses. Meanwhile, the working poor are banished to isolated suburbs, where there is little street life and often no viable public transportation.

While European movements call for preserving urban residents' "right to the city," in the US we are the position of figuring out how to simply insert ordinary people back within the urban landscape. Capitalism has birthed distorted American cities. Their vast, jutting shapes convey the helplessness and alienation of capitalist social relations. What little livable space does exist in recent years has been gobbled up by real estate and high finance. This distorted rendering of urban life expands ever outward, converting farmland into parking lots, family-owned shops into Walmarts and tight-knit rural communities into dull suburban hinterlands.

Municipalism can combat the tendency for working people in rural areas to distrust cities — and the diverse people who occupy them — by putting power back into the hands of the people. Within cities, municipalists can advance programs to transform their inhumanly scaled physical and material characteristics. A municipalist agenda would ultimately seek to reclaim urban areas as places where people actually live, not simply go shopping. In rural and suburban contexts, municipalists can offer a vision of decentralization and independence from the state that is void of bigotry and abuse. Rural allegiances to extractive industries can be broken by offering ecological ways of life tied to local, civic decision-making. These are not easy tasks, but they are essential to the holistic social change we so direly need.

## Organizing for Municipal Power

The municipalist movement in the US today is like a seedling. It is small and delicate, fresh and brimming with potential. Although we often look for leftist leadership in big cities like New York City or Chicago, these new municipal leaders are rooted in relatively smaller cities including Jackson, Mississippi and Olympia, Washington. Perhaps this shouldn't surprise us. As big cities are emptied of their original inhabitants and character, small and moderate-sized cities are offering relatively more opportunities for communal interaction and organization.

This summer, I had the opportunity to meet leaders from several municipal projects, including Cooperation Jackson, the Seattle Neighborhood Action Councils (NAC), Portland Assembly, Olympia Assembly and Genese Grill's District City Councilor campaign in Burlington, Vermont. Consistently, these activists brought sophisticated analysis, raised challenging questions and shared innovative approaches to organizing. But what I found most striking was their ability to articulate utopian ideas with common-sense policies aimed at actually improving people's lives. Their political aspirations are serious and grounded in the belief that popular power really can offer superior solutions to difficult social issues.

In Seattle, the Neighborhood Action Coalition (NAC) formed during the dramatic aftermath of Trump's election. Like many anti-Trump groups, their primary goal is to protect targeted groups against hate crimes and provide immediate services. Yet instead of convening big, amorphous "general assemblies" like Occupy Wall Street, the NAC delineates its chapters according to Seattle's dozen or so city districts. Each neighborhood chapter is empowered to select its own activities and many groups have evolved through door-to-door listening campaigns.

The NAC is creating new forms of encounter between citizens and city officials. Seattle is currently in the midst of a mayoral election with no running incumbent. The NAC is thus hosting a town-hall series called "Candidate Jeopardy," during which candidates are quizzed on a selection of citizen-authored questions. Like the game show *Jeopardy*, they must select within a range from easy questions to difficult. "Who will pick the low-hanging questions?" reads an event callout in the Seattle Weekly, "Who will pick the hard ones? Will we have a Ken Jennings [a famous Jeopardy contestant] of the 2017 elections? Come find out!"

The NAC may eventually find a friendly face in office. Nikkita Oliver, one of the front-runners, is a Black Lives Matter activist running on a platform of holding local officials accountable to the public. If she wins, Seattle's situation may begin to resemble Barcelona, where radical housing rights activist Ada Colau holds the mayorship.

In Portland, Oregon, the organization Portland Assembly uses a similar "spokes-council" model and enrolls new members to Portland's existing neighborhood associations. They are currently working to create a citywide, pro-homeless coalition; they advocate for radical reformation of the police. This spring, friends of Portland Assembly made newspaper headlines with the project "Portland Anarchist Road Care." Following a record-breaking winter, activists in familiar "black bloc" attire — with all-black clothes and bandanas covering their mouths — took to the city streets with patch asphalt and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NO DAPL
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BLACK LIVES MATTER

fixed potholes. Anarchist road care playfully disrupts the notion that those who advocate for a stateless society are reactive, destructive and impractical. It is also an excellent example of what Kate Shea Baird calls "hard pragmatism" — the use of small gains to demonstrate that real change is truly possible.

Perhaps the largest and most promising municipal movement in the US currently is Cooperation Jackson, a civic initiative based in America's Deep South. In a city where over 85 percent of the population is black while 90 percent of the wealth is held by whites, Cooperation Jackson cultivates popular power through participatory economic development. Over the course of decades, Cooperation Jackson and its predecessors have formed a federation of worker-owned cooperatives and other initiatives for democratic and ecological production. This economic base is then linked to people's assemblies, which broadly determine the project's priorities.

Like Seattle's NAC, Cooperation Jackson engages in local elections and city governance. Jackson, Mississippi's new mayor, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, comes from a family of famous black radicals and has close ties to the movement. Lumumba has endorsed Cooperation Jackson's initiative to build Center for Community Production, a public community center that specializes in 3D printing and digital production.

## Municipalism's Revolutionary Potential

These are just a few of the municipal experiments taking place throughout the US. Do these initiatives signal the birth of a revolutionary democratic movement? Will they rescue us from the jaws of fascism and realize our potential for a truly multicultural, feminist and ecological society? Perhaps — and we should all hope so. Indeed, something like a new municipal paradigm is taking shape with the recognition that anti-racism, feminist liberation, economic justice and direct democracy are intertwined. Enthusiasm for this paradigm brews at the city level, where diverse peoples are encouraged by their surroundings to hold humanistic views.

However, there are good reasons for municipalists to be wary and cautious. While radical leftists lay the groundwork of grassroots political engagement, liberal and "progressive" reform organizations like MoveOn and Indivisible are poised to absorb and divert this energy back into party politics. Ambiguous terms like "participatory democracy" are effective tools to engage people who are uncomfortable with terms like "radical" or "revolutionary." Yet they can also be easily exploited by institutions like the Democratic Party, who, humiliated and sapped of credibility, now look hungrily upon city and municipal elections.

Thus, engaging with "progressive" movements will no doubt be something of a chimera. On the one hand, they may be important allies in municipal campaigns and points of entry for political newcomers. On the other, they may crash a popular movement. And when these state-centered schemes fail, people will become upset and disillusioned — potentially re-channeling their dissatisfaction to support for the far right.

We do not need, as *The Nation* gleefully calls it, a new age of "big city progressivism." We need a non-hierarchical way of life that confers abundance and freedom to all. For today's municipal movements this means that:

- **We must valorize the city not as it is, but as it could be.**

  We must infuse the idea of citizenship with new meaning and call for radical citizenship based on participation within the municipal community, and not upon a state's bureaucratic approval.

- **We must resist the temptation to impute our faith in benevolent mayors and other personalities, no matter how charismatic or well-intentioned, unless they seek to**

**dissolve the powers they hold.**

Revolution is patient work. We are all of us unlikely to live to see the revolution we seek. Yet we have more tools at our disposal than we realize. The United States' own mythology is one of decentralization. In his book *The Third Revolution*, Murray Bookchin recounts the waves of popular assemblies that broke loose from their base in rural New England during the American Revolution and swept down to the Southern colonies. The Articles of Confederation and the Bill of Rights were concessions to popular pressure. Confederal thinking persists in the popular imaginations of even some of the most seemingly conservative individuals of our society.

Today, most people believe that nothing can be done about their government. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. The bitter lesson of Trump's victory is that change — be it for better or worse — is the only constant in human affairs. As the science fiction and fantasy author Ursula K. LeGuin so eloquently put it: "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings." The municipalist movement may be small, but its potential is revolutionary.

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