

From social mobilisation to institutional politics: Reflecting on the impact of municipalism in Madrid and Barcelona

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Abstract

In the 2015 local elections, political formations with their roots in social movements took control of several Spanish city councils, including Madrid and Barcelona. The wave of protests that began with the 15M movement in 2011 gave way to an electoral model that aspired to promote transformative politics and new ways of “doing politics”. The aim of the present study is to examine the scope and the limits of this “leap” into the institutions in Madrid and Barcelona (2015–2019). The case studies involved in-depth interviews and a documentary review. Results reveal significant differences between the two cities.

Keywords

municipalism, civil society, democracy, activism, participation, 15M, Spain.

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In 2011, the Spanish grassroots movement 15M, also known as the *Indignados*, emerged expressing deep-seated discontent with the basic structures of the representative system (Flesher-Fominaya 2015; 2020). Political parties, the electoral system and parliamentary dynamics were questioned by a movement that demanded more participation and “real democracy” (Tormey 2015; Flesher-Fominaya 2014; Simsa & Totter 2017). A few years later—following a period of experimentation with different forms of political action (Calle Collado 2016; Monterde et al 2015; Feenstra et al 2017)—15M activists came together to create new political structures to participate in the electoral process (Lobera 2019; Lobera & Parejo 2019; Prentoulis & Thomassen 2019; Ibarra-Güell et al 2018). Podemos was the first party to enjoy electoral success in 2014 at the national and European level (Torreblanca 2015). This was followed in 2015 by citizen platforms, under various denominations, gaining control in the municipal elections of several major cities that became popularly known as “cities of change” (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). Ada Colau, former spokesperson of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, Platform for People Affected by Mortgages), was elected mayor of Barcelona with the platform Barcelona en Comú (BeC), while in Madrid, former judge Manuela Carmena became mayor following the election success of Ahora Madrid (AM)¹. Other “cities of change” included Zaragoza, Cádiz and A Coruña, among others (Font & García-Espín 2019; Ordóñez, Feenstra & Franks 2018)². These electoral gains represented a leap from social movements to managing the local governments in some of Spain’s most important cities (Romanos & Sádaba 2016; Marzolf & Ganuza 2016; Subirats 2015).

The activists’ move into institutional politics was designed to be a way of initiating far-reaching transformations in the democratic model. However, this transition from civil society movement to political party sparked a familiar debate on the difficulties and challenges entailed (Prentoulis & Thomassen 2019; de Nadal 2020). The new political parties stood as “alternative platforms” (distancing themselves from traditional political parties), with the intention of deepening democracy. On the one hand, they believed that local political power would enable them to oppose the politics of austerity and the imposition of prevailing neoliberal measures (Font 2017; Blanco Salazar & Bianchi 2019).). On the other, they wanted to transform the traditional way of doing politics away from the conventional party and local government model, towards something more participatory and engaging.

The aim of the present study is to explore the scope and limitations of such a shift through the examples of BeC and AM in the period 2015–2019. Specifically, we analyse their

success (or otherwise) in two dimensions: a) implementing an agenda of transformative policies, and b) consolidating new ways of “doing politics”.

Literature review

There is a broad and relevant body of literature on the potential and limitations of social movements to bring about changes in policies and in the way of “doing politics” by becoming political parties (Przeworski & Sprague 1986; Kriesi et al 1995). On the question of policy change, some argue that the electoral path is always an incomplete or frustrating one for social movements because they cannot implement new policies or a transformative agenda through the representative system. For example, in the *History of Electoral Socialism* (1986), Przeworski and Sprague conclude that elections “are inherently conservative precisely because they are representative, representative of interests and values in a heterogeneous society” (1986, 183). In short, they consider that “elections are just not a vehicle for radical transformation” (1986, 183).

Sceptics of the electoral route argue that key is to create spaces for resistance and counter power within the broad spaces for self-organisation driven by and from society (Holloway 2002; Graeber 2013). Other scholars, in contrast, understand that social movements only achieve transformation by taking power and imposing new measures from above (Žižek 2010).

As for changing the way politics is done, and the possibility that movements can form parties capable of fostering new dynamics within their internal structures and the institutional framework, most of the extensive literature is sceptical. Thus Habermas for example argues that civil society is self-limiting, and its purpose should be to influence the representative space without aspiring to take it over (Habermas 1996). Others have advocated the desirability of maintaining civil society separate from the administration, on the understanding that the two are defined by logics that must remain differentiated and in constant tension (Cohen & Arato 1994; Keane 1998). These interpretations consider that the dynamics of social movements are not transferable to political parties and representative institutions.

Added to the above is the well known perspective of those such as Robert Michels (1^a 1911, 1998) who describe the “oligarchical” tendencies of political parties. According to this account, parties naturally incline towards hierarchical organisation and the consolidation of aristocratic and oligarchical tendencies. Parties are inevitably instruments whose purpose is to

be the “methodical organisation of the electoral masses” and their internal logics and dynamics aspire to be neither democratic nor horizontal (Michels, 1^a 1911, 1998). Przeworski and Sprague agree that parties generate leaderships and hierarchies have not only distanced themselves from the base, but “demobilized those potential efforts that could not be channeled through elections”. As a result parties “deprived grass roots initiatives of a chance to experiment and grow autonomously (Przeworski & Sprague, 1986, 184). More generally, several studies point to institutionalization as one of the main causes of demobilization (Tarrow 1989; Jung 2010). This hypothesis is particularly relevant for several reasons. The mobilization in Spain is, since 15M, a center of participatory experimentation of world reference and has had subsequent impact in other contexts (Postill 2014; Feenstra et al 2017; Flesher-Fominaya 2014; 2020). Paradoxically (or perhaps not), in a context in which discontent with representative structures and parties was one of the main reasons behind the 15M mobilisations (Font & Ganuza 2018)³ the number of parties linked to social movements has proliferated (Ibarra-Güell et al 2018; Subirats 2015; Tormey & Feenstra 2015)⁴. Although the connection between two fields such as movements and elections may be greater than is often noted (Kriesi et al 1995; Goldstone 2003), this relationship generally receives less attention from the field of contentious politics, as McAdam and Tarrow (2010) indicate. The study of BeC and AM's municipalist initiatives is therefore a key case study.

On the other hand, and despite our greater understanding of new political formations in Spain, there is still a lack of work on the experience of the first municipal government of Madrid and Barcelona. Several studies have explored the origins of new political formations in Spain (Lobera 2015; Martin 2015; Calle Collado 2016; Ubasart-González 2018; Portos 2020) and the specific nature of municipalist proposals (Roth, Monterde & Calleja 2019; Font 2017; Mir 2015). Some research explores how technology can instigate alternative ways of doing politics (Hinojona Navarro 2019; Aragón et al 2017; Romanos & Sábada 2016). Other studies analyse the programmes and objectives of municipalist formations in their attempts to promote alternatives to the politics of austerity (Subirats 2018; Aguiló & Sabariego 2019; Blanco Salazar & Bianchi 2019). However, at the end of the first “cities of change” term of office in Madrid and Barcelona, and in light of their modest results in the 2019 elections⁵, it is useful to examine the perceptions of their main actors on the advances and limitations of these experiences. Furthermore, it is relevant to do so by taking into account the testimonies of both the activists who moved into the institutions and those who remained on the “outside”. Approaching both views (i.e., that of activists making the “institutional leap” versus those who remain “outside” the institution) provides important insights for social

movement studies. It deepens our understanding of the connection between activism and elections (McAdam & Tarrow 2010; Goldstone 2003). It also allows us to observe the antagonism between different organizational logics —more horizontal or more vertical— (Flesher-Fominaya 2014). Finally, the study serves to evaluate the effects —and limits— of the institutionalization process (Przeworski & Sprague 1986; Kriesi et al 1995). Moreover, it does so in terms of two contrasting municipalist experiences where the leap from mobilization to institution occurred with great electoral success.

Methodology

This research is based on a case study of the two city councils governed by BeC and AM. We take a qualitative approach to examine and reflect on activists’ perceptions of the advances made in the period 2015–2019. To this end, we used a combination of interviews and an analytical review of party documents and manifestos. 26 people were interviewed among two different types of actors: people closely related to activist groups who had moved into public institutions in Madrid and Barcelona; and 15M activists who had continued their activities outside the institutions. The purposive sampling of key actors has been the method followed in this research. As regards activists, we contacted 1) groups in defense for the right to housing and human rights such as PAH; 2) elder group of activists in defense of a participatory democracy and the Welfare State such as *iai@flautas*; 3) technoactivists linked to the struggle for digital rights and free culture and 4) activists linked to neighbourhood self managed initiatives. For the selection of the people who exercise political competences in the administration or in the parties, three different types of profiles were contacted. 1) councillors 2) people with a role of responsibility within the parties and 3) people linked to the digital platforms of participatory democracy such as Decidim-Barcelona and Decide-Madrid and Media-Lab Prado.

	Typology description	Identification in the article
Barcelona	BeC Councillor	i1
	Member of BeC	i2
	People linked to digital platforms of participatory democracy	i3, i4

	Activists in defense for the right to housing and human rights	i5, i6
	member of the elder group of activists in defense of a participatory democracy and the Welfare State (Iai@flautas)	i7, i8, i9
	Technoactivists linked to the struggle for digital rights and free culture	i10, i11
Madrid	AM Councillor	i12
	Member of AM	i13
	People linked to digital platforms of participatory democracy	i14, i15
	Activists in defense for the right to housing and human rights	i16, i17, i18, i19
	member of the elder group of activists in defense of a participatory democracy and the Welfare State (Iai@flautas)	i20, i21, i22
	Activists linked to neighbourhood self managed initiatives	i23, i24, i25
	Technoactivists linked to the struggle for digital rights and free culture	i26

Table 1: Profile of participants of the study

The selection of interviews allowed us to speak with a diverse group of actors, albeit with certain imbalances. For example as regards the number of participants per city (with a greater participation of subjects in Madrid -15- than in Barcelona -11-) and as regards gender (only 7 out of 26 interviewed were women). The interviews took place in public spaces and a number were held in council administration departments. The interviews were held from June 3-6 in Barcelona and from June 7-10, 2018. The average length of the interviews was 61 minutes, with 36.30 minutes being the shortest and 94.50 minutes the longest. The interviews were conducted with individuals except for the activists in defense for the right to housing and human rights (grouped in groups of 2 people) and Iai@flautas (in groups of 3).

The interviews were transcribed and analysed in detail. The interviewees' anonymity is guaranteed as any identifying information is not reported in the study. The following table 1 shows the list of acronyms. An extensive analysis of the documentation and communication developed by activists, formations and municipal governments in both cities in the period 2015-2019 has also been developed.

Transformative policies put to the test

Promoting transparent governance

One of the key demands of the 2015 municipalist proposals was for greater transparency in the institutions and in representatives' decision-making processes as expressed through mechanisms of accountability, scrutiny and audit.⁶ Increased transparency was identified as one of the key pillars of the “new” municipal formations. It was therefore no surprise that this issue generated a great deal of expectation (Peña-López 2017). The new city councils were promoted on the promise to increase public scrutiny of their administrations.

Given the growing importance of transparency since 15M, we were interested in perceptions concerning how well transparency had been managed in the two city councils in their first years in power. In general, interviewees inside and outside the institutions claimed significant advances had been made to increase transparency in both city councils. In Barcelona, several activists highlighted the innovative work undertaken by the Office for Transparency and Good Practices, set up in 2015, and particularly the Ethical Mailbox launched in 2017 by the city council.⁷ The mailbox was described as a “sophisticated” and “innovative” system (i2, i10).

Similarly, interviewees in both cities agreed that significant steps had been taken to establish a more open and transparent relationship with lobbyists. On this point, one interviewee from BeC argued that “the greatest success was the changes in the logic underlying the relationship with the lobbies and with power groups in general in Barcelona” (i3). Establishing more transparent relationships with interest groups or power groups was mentioned by respondents in both cities as an area in which they had “made positive advances” (i1, i2, i10, i11, i12, i13, i14, i22, i26). Interviewees from inside the institutions described how this change met with resistance as soon as they took control of the council, as illustrated in the following comment: “many lobbyists were in the habit of picking up the phone to tell the council what they must do, and we changed this practice” (i2).

In general, the perception of greater transparency was shared across both cities, and by activists who had remained outside the institution as well as those who took up internal positions. Frequent comments were also made in the interviews along the lines of “there has been a huge improvement in matters of transparency” (i14) or “openness and proximity is much better now than in previous periods” (i22).

Promoting sustainable economic and environmental policies

Another area of interest in the study is local government achievements in new sustainable economic and environmental measures. Of the six points analysed in this paper, together with transparency this one generated the greatest consensus among interviewees in terms of the significance of the innovations introduced. Two particular aspects were highlighted in the responses: 1) efficient and balanced economic management, and 2) commitment to environmental measures. The activists interviewed in Madrid (but also in Barcelona) were at pains to point out that “one positive aspect [is] that they have reduced public debt, which gives the lie to the cliché that the left is no good at managing” (i19). Those inside the institutions also affirmed the idea that “everyone knows we’re reducing the debt. We’ve successfully dismantled the mantra repeated by previous managers and everyone else who said we would fail” (i12).

The interviewees described how the councils were endeavouring not only to manage efficiently but also to develop new economic models. One activist in Madrid highlighted the “bold commitment to develop the local economy, the social economy and alternative forms of production” (i25). The drive towards more sustainable economic models linked to the local community and the environment was one of the most recurrent subjects in the interviews (i1, i2, i5, i12, i16, i22, i25). Madrid’s urban mobility policies were also positively appraised.⁸ Decisions taken in this field were considered “excellent work” (i25) and “a determined and fundamental commitment” (i13). The interviewees stated that not only policies had changed, but also “residents’ awareness and mindset” (i20, i22) and that “for the first time protocols have been developed to seriously and systematically reduce pollution in Madrid” (i12).

In the case of Barcelona, responses highlighted the promotion of self-management through cooperatives and the commitment to renewable energies. On this latter issue, one activist stated that “changing suppliers was another positive aspect from this new government” (i9). From the inside, interviewees also recognised that “our problem of sovereignty today lies in energy, water, etc. [...] and despite the limitations, significant advances are being made to implement sustainable environmental policies” (i1).

Overall then, we observed that in both contexts there was a positive perception of the policy of promoting a model of the city as an urban space underpinned by sustainability and greater environmental concern (Blanco Gomà & Subirats 2018).

Housing policies: a source of controversy

The formations elected to the Barcelona and Madrid city councils in 2015 also set out to challenge certain neoliberal policies and provide responses to citizens' basic needs. Housing policies were one of their main areas of concern (Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel & García 2017; Charnock & Ribera-Fumaz 2017). However, interviewees in general expressed disappointment with progress on housing policy, albeit with subtle differences between participants in the two cities.

On AM's management of the housing question, interviewees were impressed by the city council's legal challenge to the sale of public social housing to vulture funds by the previous mayor, Ana Botella (i16, i17).⁹ This was however the only issue the activists assessed favourably. In general they were critical of the government's management of other housing matters, stating that "the housing policy is a disaster characterised by gentrification, touristification and large urban developments [...] they have proposed no alternative model for the city" (i25) or "the housing policies have been atrocious" (i24). The PAH activists were especially critical of the way housing had been managed and considered that "eye-catching headlines like 'Carmena stops evictions' or 'Carmena brings evictions to an end' weren't helpful because they desensitise people to a problem that continues to exist" (i18). In general, activists seemed to perceive that governance was prioritised over issues such as addressing the housing problem, which resulted in "governing with the brake on" (i20) according to the *iai@flautas*. In turn, although they were more sympathetic, the interviewees working within the Madrid city council readily admitted that "much more could have been done on the housing front" (i14) or "the main problem we haven't been able to resolve is high rents and housing. Although some progress has been made, I think there's still a lot left to do" (i12). In sum, there was notable disappointment with the way the Madrid administration had handled housing policy, confirming studies elsewhere which also draw attention to the shortcoming of Carmena's administration in making headway on this issue (Janoschka & Mota 2020).

In Barcelona, interviewees also expressed disappointment with the performance of the administration, although their criticisms were less severe than those reported in Madrid. In this context it should be remembered that housing was a priority for Ada Colau (former PAH spokesperson). Activists noted for example that "we were often not included or given a voice in discussions to find joint solutions" (i8). From within BeC, tensions with social movements had come to be expected. One interviewee explained that "of course there are tensions with the social movements, not only with the PAH but with other housing groups in general [...]"

but sometimes this can also be useful because it means the struggle continues to make progress [outside the institutions]” (i2).

The *iai@flautas* activists pointed out that one of their central slogans is “We want our children to have a decent life”¹⁰ and that institutions cannot fully satisfy this demand because their capacity to act is limited. Similarly, one of the interviewees from within the council noted that they had no control over some policy areas, and that this prevented them from enacting the policies set out in their programme. On the other hand, these failures did not, seem to be regarded as fatal in terms of the ability of the administration to advance the cause of a transnational “strategic front” (Russell, 2019) or transnational network (Thompson 2021) of likeminded radical administrations. Specifically, one interviewed explained that:

It must be remembered that many aspects of our programme and political project (for 2015) relate to issues that the city council has no direct decision-making power. Our position was more political in that sense. For example, we knew we wouldn’t have full responsibility for issues like social rental or housing policies. But there was a gap between obligations and competences. We were more concerned about obligations than competences, and in this sense we stood for election on the premise that we could force the position by using our political strength to change the landscape. And that’s the idea. Ada Colau has used this influence to also create a network with other cities like Amsterdam, Berlin and many others with the aim of demanding more competences and taking action against organisations like, for example, Airbnb [...] And we think that one of our successes is that our agenda is not just ours but it has been adopted (to a greater or lesser extent) in cities all over the world. In that sense we represent the future on how to rethink cities. II

The tension between the platform and the city council reflected in these interviews is also evident in PAH publications, some of which recognise that progress has been made in negotiations and the pressure exerted on the council,¹¹ but others were critical of the town council under Colau’s leadership (see also Font & García-Espín 2019). In November 2018, the PAH published the following statement:

If anything has become clear, it is that without pressure on the administration, not only do they do nothing, but also the Regional Government and the City Council are incapable of sitting down to work towards a common objective: to provide a rapid, efficient response to the ongoing housing emergency. We cannot continue to

allow administrative timescales to be so distanced from reality and from the urgency facing families who can wait no longer.¹²

In February 2019 their criticism escalated with the publication of what the PAH called the “*Carta de la vergonya*” (the letter of shame), addressed to both the president of the Generalitat (Quim Torra) and the mayor, to demand compliance with agreements reached in 2018 and “to put an end to the systematic violation of human rights entailed by evictions with no decent alternative housing”.¹³ In sum, Barcelona seems to offer a case study in terms of understanding the limits set by institutional politics on radical politics, although as noted the picture is somewhat mixed with real progress observed in terms of governance and housing policies (Blanco Salazar & Bianchi, 2019).

New ways of doing politics: are they really transformative?

In 2015, the new municipalist platforms were premised on a commitment to transform the way politics was done, in terms of opening up to citizen participation, democratising internal party dynamics and implementing alternative leadership models. The Zapatista “lead by obeying” concept was enshrined in the 2015 electoral campaign and used in, for example, the presentation of the *Guanyem Barcelona* (Let’s win Barcelona) manifesto that aspired to achieving “a true metropolitan democracy that forces representatives to lead by obeying”.¹⁴ Its electoral programme stated that “the same philosophy used to draw up this list of candidates will be applied: to go forward by asking questions and lead by obeying”.¹⁵ AM followed the same line in the presentation of its primaries, describing itself as “a party that represents people committed to lead by obeying and listen to, and be bound by, citizens’ voices”.¹⁶ This slogan was also used to present the 2017 participatory budgets in social media: “We want to lead by obeying, that’s why you decide #100millonesparaMadrid”.¹⁷

The philosophy behind the municipal parties in Barcelona and Madrid overturned the dominant conceptualisations of power in systems of governance from “power over” to “power to”. Instead of seeing power as a macro-social resource to be exercised by the few in the name of the many, power is re-conceptualised in micro-social terms as a property possessed by the community itself. This challenged the idea of governance as something exercised by an elite or an oligarchy for the benefit of the many, which is the dominant principle underlying representation in liberal democracies (Tormey 2015; van Reybrouk 2016). The principle of “leading by obeying” is based on the premise that society is entitled

to exercise power in and through its representatives, who are answerable for their actions through an ongoing process of deliberation and consultation.

In summary, the municipalist proposals in the 2015 election campaigns in Madrid and Barcelona clearly set out to change the nature of decision-making processes in local government, the internal structure of their political formations and their leadership. But what did the actors think had been achieved?

Towards a (more) participatory democracy?

The central role of citizen participation in local decision making was one of the main themes in the electoral programmes of BeC and AM in 2015.¹⁸ The BeC programme contained messages confirming the need to “achieve radical change in the way decisions are made”, “take democracy to a more direct and participatory level”, “achieve co-governance of council and city”, “construct direct community participation mechanisms” and “decentralise participation”.¹⁹ In turn, the messages in AM’s programme spoke of “broad citizen participation”, “accountability and active, responsible citizen participation in decision making” and the obligation to “take citizens into account”.²⁰

Of the six questions analysed in this study, the participation issue sparked the greatest differences of opinion among the interviewees. In general, those inside the local government responded more favourably than the activists. Broadly speaking, those on the inside pointed to significant progress – more enthusiastically in Madrid than in Barcelona – but also admitted that the process had been difficult and sometimes frustrating, and fell short of their own ambitions. The activists, in turn, expressed widespread disappointment, although they also recognised that some steps had been taken and acknowledged that their expectations had been very high.

Interviewees from within the city council in Barcelona highlighted the promotion of participation at the neighbourhood level, and the progress made by the participatory democracy platform, *Decidim* (Barandiaran et al 2017; Peña-Lopez 2017).²¹ According to one of the interviewees:

Regarding participation, we created *Decidim* to incentivise participation both digitally and analogically, and it didn’t work out too badly. There was high participation in deciding the council investment plan and various participation experiments are ongoing in specific cases in the city (i1).

Individuals who have collaborated with *Decidim* also stated that “participation channels are varied and sophisticated” (i2) and “many advances have been made in recent years” (i3). However, they were in no doubt that “it still doesn’t work spontaneously” (i3) and “we’re still a long way from where we’d like to be” (i3). One activist from the BeC platform even said that:

Of course we have done things like the strategic plan for the city where activities were implemented through platforms like *Decidim* or neighbourhood meetings [...] we’ve taken great steps, but in practice these processes opened up collaboration to groups that were already organised and not the rest of the population that wasn’t mobilised (i2).

The same person concluded that “I must admit this issue is one of my greatest disappointments” (i2). The interviewees attached to the council identified the main hurdles to progress as the cumbersome bureaucracy in the administration and what they call “the technocrats” considered as one of “the biggest problems of Barcelona (administration)” (I3, I2). Heavy bureaucracy and painfully slow processes were considered to be the main problem, as illustrated by the following comment:

When you join the council with a full programme you see that every issue you want to open up to participation actually becomes an obstacle to the rapid and simple implementation of that point in the programme. So participation ends up becoming an obstacle to achieving everything else (i2).

The activists, in turn, generally expected much greater collaboration. They recognised that some progress had been made, but it fell far short of the expectations built up during the election campaign. Specifically, some of their comments mentioned that “they’ve tried to do things but it’s nothing to get excited about” (i10) or “the co-governance, civil society collaboration discourse is a long way from a real transformative dynamic” (i11). The group most critical of this question was the *iai@flautas*, who identified the main problem as the way participation is conceived, as shown in the following comment:

The great problem is that when people who criticise the limits of representative democracy forget that [criticism] when they move into the institutions [...] And when they talk about participation they don’t change the concept based on ‘I vote for you and you sort everything out’ [...] We don’t agree with that. I vote for you and you sort everything out, no! I vote for you and you and we sort it out together (i7).

In Madrid, the interviewees attached to or collaborating with the council were generally quite satisfied with the progress made and repeatedly praised the participatory experience. Several interviewees mentioned that the city council received the UN public service award in 2018 in the category for “making institutions inclusive and ensuring participation in decision making”,²² one of the eight winners selected from among 111 candidates. The Decide Madrid platform and the processes implemented to allocate the participatory budgets were mentioned as significant achievements (i12, i13, i14, i15), together with the *Observatorio de la Ciudad* (City Observatory). This was designed to be a deliberative chamber made up of randomly chosen citizens, and considered by the interviewees as an example of “innovation and advanced democratic experimentation” (i15).²³ The respondents regarded Madrid as a reference in this field and in one case, “an international example, especially on participatory budgets and online consultations” (i13). This idea was echoed by another interviewee who stated that “we are developing new standards of participation at a global level” (i14).

The interviewees involved in these participatory experiments all spoke highly of the work undertaken, although one of them also noted that “expectations were very high, probably too high, and that explains why many people might feel frustrated” (i14). This observation chimes with the opinions of the activists, who were in general less enthusiastic. The latter observed that some progress had been made (particularly in the online platform), but felt it had little impact in terms of the most pressing issues facing citizens. One interviewee from the PAH stated that “they tried to do things around the participatory budgets, but then it had no effect or influence on such vital matters as housing” (i17). Another activist observed what he described as “participatory inflation. That is, lots of parallel programmes and at the same time, citizen participation without any order or coordination” (i25). Several respondents wondered what impact the participatory experiments had made, and what their underlying objectives were. The most critical activists considered that “there’s no real intention to introduce alternative forms of participation” (i24), “the way they do politics is still very traditional” (i23) and “these projects all sound good but lead to processes that go nowhere” (i23).

Anti-oligarchical party?

The new political parties stood for election with the promise to transform the “way of doing politics” not only within local governments but also in their own structures and internal dynamics. The party concept was barely mentioned in their public presentations in 2014;

rather, they chose to define themselves as “a platform”, “new spaces for participation” in the case of Barcelona (where the concept of party was not mentioned²⁴), or “project” and “municipalism” in Madrid (although the association was made between their organisation and the party concept on one occasion).²⁵

Municipalism in Madrid and Barcelona aspired to break away from the traditional vertical party organisational structure and replace it with horizontal logics (Font & García-Espín 2019). These initiatives are wary of the party label and seek to distance themselves from the bureaucratic practices critics allege are endemic to the party form. The electoral success and swift rise to power of the two formations in Madrid and Barcelona required them to urgently define their internal structure. A few years after their appearance we are now able to examine – at least in part – whether they have managed to avoid the oligarchical straitjacket described by Michels.

On this point, the interviewees’ responses were largely negative in both cities, particularly in Madrid where the organisational structure seemed rather opaque. Opinions on the Barcelona case were more favourable, but still mentioned the traditional tension between the logic of (horizontal) social movements and that of the participants in the representative institutions.

The BeC respondents considered that progress had been made in establishing a hybrid model midway between political party and social movement logic, which is the conclusion also reached by various analysts (Eizaguirre, Pradel-Miquel & García 2017; Aragón et al 2017; Deseriis 2020). One interviewee stated that BeC is not “simply a movement, but neither is it a party” (i3). Another explained that the platform does not operate as a card-carrying membership organisation, but rather “you’re considered to be an activist in as far as you participate in something [...] and this participation is what gives you the right to participate in the decision-making processes” (i2). The same respondent said that after the election campaign the number of participants fell, but even so a large number of people were committed, and there was also an extensive network of sympathisers who also played an important role. On this issue one councillor explained that “it’s very difficult to have hundreds of gladiators who are always active in politics” (i1) and considered it normal for many participants to take on a more passive role. He added that the formation had successfully engaged the community through various channels and that they worked in a different way to the political parties. As an example, he pointed out that “every two weeks Ada Colau goes to one of the neighbourhoods, with no press and no agenda” (i1), and openly discusses the community’s problems, complaints and concerns.

The activists were more critical, arguing that the internal dynamics were not really transformative because of the complex challenge of balancing the agendas of all the parts of the movement. The interviewees affirmed that “the same old organisational models were reproduced; those who are now inside the institutions are very unreceptive” (i9) and “they aren’t waiting for us with open arms, quite the contrary in fact” (i10). Some claimed that traditional logics underpinned the way the electoral lists were drawn up and the internal decision-making process, and when activists or movements expressed their doubts “from the inside they don’t understand the conflict, or that we want to make proposals from the outside” (i11). In general, the interviews in Barcelona revealed the classic tension between movements and parties (and horizontal and vertical logics).

The situation in Madrid differed in that criticism came from both within and outside the administration, and pointed to a clear failure to create internal democratic structures as (Font & García-Espín, 2019; Janoschka & Mota 2020). Individuals inside the city council and from the platform asserted that “there’s no internal democracy in AM. There’s a coordination committee, but in reality that committee was stymied from the start. There are no spaces for discussion and deliberation within the AM structure as a formation” (i12). Another interviewee identified the following paradox: “what’s strange is that we’ve opened up more channels for participation within the council than within the structure of AM” (i13). The PAH-Madrid activists agreed with this analysis, stressing that in the initial phase it seemed that AM was opening up to movements and to collaboration between activists and representatives, but that this impression turned out to be short lived. On this point they stated that “at the start we had monthly meetings, but that has cooled off” (i16). Another interviewee expressed a similar idea: “yes, several attempts were made to organise a series of meetings, but after a few sessions we realised it was just a waste of time. It was actually just a wall to keep us quiet and a form of control” (i19). The *iai@flautas* also stated “we could do with a bit more dialogue. In the end the council is well managed economically, but it also seems spineless in many aspects” (i21). In general the Madrid activists expressed deep disappointment in the lack of transformative, horizontal dynamics in AM, and in the way power was concentrated in the hands of Carmena and her team of close advisors, leading one activist to conclude the process had ended up “dismantling activity at street level but without really altering anything substantial from within the institutions” (i23).

Leadership

Related to the above point are the variances in the leadership models adopted by Ada Colau and Manuela Carmena. Interviewees noted the significant advances made by both women. In general terms, they appreciated Colau's respect for social movements, and regarded Carmena as highly professional. Colau is seen to be concerned about social problems, while Carmena is acknowledged as a "good manager".

Activists in Barcelona were quick to praise the mayor's performance: One commented for example: "every time Ada Colau speaks I agree with what she says [...] She's respectful and picks up many finer points" (i10) or "Ada is promoting a structure that is by no means limited to simple leadership" (i11). Criticism of Carmena was harsher, however. She was seen to "exercise leadership, she wants to lead the process and doesn't really promote open forms of participation" (i26) or that "her way of doing politics is very traditional" (i24). Broadly speaking, the interviewees saw Carmena's behaviour as "presidential" (i12, i13, i15).

A striking result from the interviews in both cities was the unanimous recognition of both leaders' values and moral commitment in their leadership style. The majority of the responses valued them as exemplary representatives in questions of transparency and honour. Even those most critical of Carmena considered her to be a crucial figure driving a progressive project for the city. Passion, authenticity and absence of *hauteur* were characteristics attributed to both leaders. In the case of Carmena, she was described as "a very approachable citizen. She travels by metro and bus" (i20) and she readily "approaches us to ask questions and talk with us when we meet her" (i20). Interviewees in Barcelona noted that Colau "gives up part of her salary for social causes" (i7), mentioning as well "her respect for social movements" (i10). Despite Carmena's presidential – or perhaps regal - style, the interviewees emphasised that she represented an urgently needed departure from the past and recognised her modesty, the absence of any desire for personal benefit and her popularity based on her ethical approach. In the case of Colau, interviewees also viewed her leadership model as positive. In sum, the interviewees in both cities acknowledged how each had brought a notable change of accent and comportment to their respective offices.

By way of conclusion

The cities of Barcelona and Madrid are both highly relevant cases through which to examine the complex relationship between political movements (civil society) and institutions.

Listening to the viewpoints of those working from inside the institutions and those who remained outside the representative space has provided a broad picture of the two local administrations. The different reception and interpretation of these administrations offers us some interesting insights into the problem of reconciling horizontal activism and vertical political practice.

As regards areas of policy, the promotion of transparency and environmental sustainability policies are among the most notable advances. At the other extreme, lack of progress on the right to housing led to widespread disappointment among the interviewees (although with nuanced differences between the two cities). In turn, the promotion of new ways of doing politics at different levels met with positive responses regarding increased citizen participation (more enthusiastically in the case of Madrid) and recognition of leadership styles based on approachability and honour. At the same time, many expressed noted the ease with which activists were side-lined or even silenced in the process of consolidating these new administrations. Colau's administration fared better in this respect, although even here there is evidence of tension between party and social movement logics. In this regard, the tension between different logics (party/movement), previously observed in the case of Podemos also emerges as a complex issue in the municipalist initiatives (Lobera & Parejo 2019; Calvo 2019; Prentoulis & Thomassen 2019; Flesher Fominaya 2020).

The interviews evidenced that both those working from within institutions and those on the outside believe that representative democracy must be extended in terms of the degree of participation. However insiders tended to acknowledge the inherent limitations imposed by the separation of participation and administration. They were "naïve" when they entered the city council, but quickly learned to appreciate the (technical and bureaucratic) difficulties entailed by increased participation, whilst still considering this a desirable objective. The interviews also revealed the difficulty that those within the administration found in accepting the transformation from their role as a counter power (pressurising and monitoring elected representatives, Keane 2009) to exercising power and taking on positions of responsibility within the very institutions they were protesting against not long before. Those that took this step recognise the difficulties that accompany this change, and the tensions arising with others who continue to take grassroots action outside. Their proposal to transform politics or go beyond representative democracy, from within the structure, remains clear but is now perceived as a more long-term objective.²⁶

Those who remained within the activist milieu saw matters differently. In general, they were not as optimistic about the progress made and perceive a dilution of the influence

of social mobilisation due to the loss of activists to the institutions themselves. In their view, the shift to governing as opposed to organising has weakened grassroots social movements and may even lead to the co-option of those who joined the institutions and as a result, limit the possibilities of breaking away from the status quo. These opinions echo Jacques Rancière's thesis that the State (and its structures) is not in itself a democracy (*le politique*), but "*police*" - a means for ordering society from the top down (Rancière 2006). The conclusions of Przeworski and Sprague also resonate. They observed that the electoral path of socialism provoked a direct erosion of its electoral program as result of the search for electoral efficiency. Przeworski and Sprague concluded that the policy of the pact generated not only a decline in support among the working class but also "demobilized those potential efforts —cooperatives, councils, and commons— that could not be channeled through elections" (Przeworski & Sprague 1986: 183). This seems to coincide, at least in part, with the perceptions captured by the interviewees who show a certain loss of confidence in the possibility of generating profound transformation from the electoral track. Many of the activists interviewed believe that the shift of social movements into the institutions can bring about some small improvements, but is incapable of generating (and may even halt) the change they pursue.

Clearly, the improvements and progress made cannot be underestimated. Previous studies have already allowed us to appreciate — some of them centered on the history of socialism and others on the impact of the new left parties that emerged from the New Social Movements in the mid-60s' (eg. Kriesi et al. 1995)— the capacity of movements to influence established politics electorally. This analysis of two prominent municipal governments has allowed us to observe relevant advances in terms of new dynamics, measures and experimentation in the field of participation. However, this study also shows the limits and obstacles to achieving radical transformation through the electoral process, as has been seen in previous historical initiatives and which we now observe at a local level. On the one hand, the institutionalization of movements encounters complex logics that accompany electoral representation. On the other hand, the mobilization itself loses momentum because of the dispersal of energies and efforts of activists. In short, the classic debate over which strategies are, or should be, most appropriate for achieving political transformation remains open and engaging for social movement activists thinking about the limits and possibilities of political power.

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Notes

¹ AM brought together a wide confluence of parties (Podemos, IU or EQUO), groups (Traficantes de sueños or Patio maravillas) and independents. BeC is mainly the result of a confluence of parties (including Podemos, Equo, Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds, Esquerra Unida and Procés Constituent a Catalunya).

² With a view to the 2015 Local Elections, many municipalist political parties were formed. See Pablo Rivas ‘El mapa estatal del asalto municipalista’, Diagonal. Available at: <https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/global/25880-mapa-estatal-del-asalto-municipalista.html>

³ See data from the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (CIS) on the “Percepción de los principales problemas de España”. Available at: http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/-Archivos/Indicadores/documentos_html/TresProblemas.html

⁴ Between 2014 and 2015 618 new parties registered, In 2009 and 2010 just 295 new political parties were registered; see the Registro de Partidos: https://sede.mir.gob.es/nfrontal/webpartido_politico.html

⁵ In Barcelona, the ERC (Republican Left of Catalonia) won the most votes, but BeC continues to govern in minority following pacts with other parties. In Madrid, AM won the most votes, but lost control of the city council as their seats combined with those of the Partido Socialista (PSOE) were not sufficient to form a majority. The election results for all cities can be consulted at:

<https://resultados.elpais.com/elecciones/2019/municipales/>

⁶ BeC Code of Ethics (2014). Available at:

https://barcelonaencomu.cat/sites/default/files/2014.12_codi_etica_cat.pdf (in Catalan) and the section “Gobierno abierto, transparente y eficaz” (Open, transparent and efficient government) on the AM programme:

<https://ahoramadrid.org/ahora-madrid/programa/>

⁷ Further information about the Barcelona City Council Ethical and Good Governance Mailbox can be found at: <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/digital/en/blog/the-ethical-mailbox-a-pioneering-method-for-reporting-corruption>

⁸ AM’s “Madrid Central” plan brought in a policy to restrict traffic and control air pollution levels. See Fatima Cabellero (28/10/2019) “La movilidad en Madrid, a debate: estas son las propuestas de los partidos para solucionar la contaminación”, Eldiario.es. Available at: https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/Politicacom_0_829067876.html

⁹ Much was written in the press about the case brought to court by AM (which was eventually shelved). See, for example, ‘Carmena denuncia a Botella ante el Tribunal de Cuentas por la venta de vivienda pública a fondos buitres’ (Carmena takes Botella to the Court of Auditors over sale of public housing to vulture funds) Público, 2 November 2017. Available at:

<https://www.publico.es/sociedad/carmena-denuncia-botella-tribunal-cuentas-venta-vivienda-publica-fondos-buitres.html>

¹⁰ See manifesto ‘Somos hijas del 15M’. Available (in Spanish) at: <http://www.iaioflautas.org/page/2/>

¹¹ The archive of public statements can be consulted at: <https://pahbarcelona.org/es/tag/mesa-de-emergencia/>

¹² PAH-Barcelona (13/11/2018). “Once again it is patently obvious that the pace of the Administration is not up to meeting the needs of evicted families” <https://pahbarcelona.org/es/una-vez-mas-queda-patente-que-los-ritmos-de-la-administracion-no-est-an-a-la-altura-de-las-necesidades-de-las-familias-desahuciadas-2/>

¹³ PAH-Barcelona (26/02/2019) ‘Carta de la vergonya’. Available (in Spanish) at:

<https://pahbarcelona.org/es/comunicado-carta-dirigida-a-al-presidente-de-la-generalitat-el-sr-quim-torra-y-a-la-alcaldesa-de-barcelona-la-sra-ada-colau/>

¹⁴ Guanyem Barcelona manifesto (18/01/2017). Available at: <https://barcelonaencomu.cat/es/manifiesto-guanyem-barcelona>

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- ¹⁵ Presentation of BeC electoral programme (26/04/2015). Available at: <https://barcelonaencomu.cat/es/prensa/miles-de-personas-han-participado-en-la-elaboracion-del-programa-de-barcelona-en-comu>
- ¹⁶ Announcement of AM primaries. Available at: <https://primarias.ahoramadrid.org/por-que-votar-en-las-primarias-de-ahora-madrid/>
- ¹⁷ Participatory budget presentation in social media (18/01/2017): <https://twitter.com/AhoraMadrid/status/821741154035265536>
- ¹⁸ The concept of participation is mentioned 140 times in the AM programme (71 pages) and 218 in that of BeC (116 pages).
- ¹⁹ BeC programme. Available at: https://barcelonaencomu.cat/sites/default/files/programaencomun_cast.pdf
- ²⁰ AM programme. Available at: https://ahoramadrid.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/AHORAMADRID_Programa_Municipales_2015.pdf
- ²¹ Decidim Barcelona: <https://www.decidim.barcelona/>
- ²² Luca Constantini (7/06/2018). ‘La ONU premia al Ayuntamiento de Madrid por su portal de participación’. El País. Available at: https://elpais.com/ccaa/2018/06/07/madrid/1528383491_645024.html. See also (English text): <https://oidp.net/en/content.php?id=1461>
- ²³ A description of the City Observatory is available at: <https://www.medialab-prado.es/proyectos/observatorio-de-la-ciudad>
- ²⁴ See BeC (2014) ‘¿Cómo hemos llegado hasta aquí?’. Available at: <https://barcelonaencomu.cat/es/como-hemos-llegado-hasta-aqui>
- ²⁵ See AM. Available at: <https://ahoramadrid.org/ahora-madrid/>

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