

# Interrupting the neoliberal masculine state machinery? Strategic selectivities and municipalist practice in Barcelona and Zagreb

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## Abstract

All municipalist initiatives are confronted with what Marx called the ‘state machinery’: an ensemble of apparatuses protecting the status quo of capitalist accumulation. It is difficult for municipalist movements to sustain their momentum of storming the city halls in the face of this reality. Looking at Barcelona En Comú (Barcelona in Common) and Zagreb Je NAŠ! (Zagreb Is Ours!), the article discusses what experiences municipalist actors gain when inspecting the state machinery close up. We identify the traces they leave on the materiality of the (local) state: organising participation as conflict, scandalising the serving of particularistic interests, and confronting sexist behaviour within the masculine apparatuses. Nevertheless, the examples illustrate the systemic inertia of the hegemonically programmed state apparatuses and the difficulties of breaking with neoliberal and masculinist policies.

## Keywords

local government, municipalism, state theory, strategic selectivity, urban struggles

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## 摘要

所有地方自治倡议都必须面对马克思所说的“国家机器”：一组保护资本主义积累现状的机器。面对这样的现实，地方自治运动很难维持冲击市政厅的势头。通过研究 Barcelona En Comú（我们共同的巴塞罗那）和 Zagreb Je NAŠ!（萨格勒布是我们的！）这两个运动，本文探讨地方自治行为者在近距离检视国家机器时获得的体验。我们识别了他们在（地方）政府的物质性上留下的痕迹：将参与组织为冲突，丑化为特定利益服务的做法，并在男性机器中直面性别歧视行为。然而，这些例子说明了霸权程序化的国家机器的系统惯性以及与新自由主义和大男子主义政策决裂的困难。

## 关键词

地方政府、地方自治主义、政府理论、策略选择性、城市斗争

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## Introduction

All municipalist initiatives, whether or not their aim is election, are confronted with what Karl Marx called the ‘state machinery’ (1871/1973: 336). Although the ‘democratic turn’ of social movements after the crisis of 2008 meant a renewed engagement with the state (Flesher Fominaya, 2015) and the municipalist movements offer ‘an empirical window onto the possibility (or lack thereof) of transforming the social relationships that compose the state’ (Russell, 2019: 1008), a state-theoretical analysis of the institutional assault of the municipalist lists is missing. Instead of reproducing the flaws of a state-centred perspective (see, for a critique, Thompson, 2021), such a theoretical frame is able to carve out the specificities of the (local) state and its selectivities. From this entry point, the article asks (1) what kind of strategic structural barriers constitute the local state in Barcelona and Zagreb and (2) which collective strategies have emerged to interrupt this state machinery? Looking at Barcelona En Comú (BeC, Barcelona in Common) and Zagreb Je NAŠ! (ZJN, Zagreb Is Ours), the article explores the experiences of two actors closely embedded within the state, its rhythms and logics. We argue (1) that a state-theoretical approach

helps to analyse this terrain as constituted by neoliberal masculine rationalities and timescapes, blocking short-term changes, and (2) that, although the (local) state is a slow, contradictory machinery, the municipalist projects were able to leave their trace on its materiality at various points. The examples of ZJN and BeC show that these interventions are able to discredit the status quo and envision another future in terms of decentralisation, feminised politics and the construction of genuine political time.

Bringing the mundane experiences of the municipalist platforms into a dialogue with materialist and feminist state-theoretical concepts, we unpack three central lines of municipalist interruptions of the (local) state machinery. Their illustration constitutes the core of the article: neoliberalisation/centralisation, masculine grammars and conflicting temporalities.

We understand (new) municipalism as an approach that situates the urban and local scale as a ‘strategic entry point for developing broader practices and theories of transformative social change’ (Russell, 2019: 991), in response to the multiple neoliberal crises and their authoritarian management. Through new alliances between movement actors and parties, the aim is to democratise and feminise politics as well as to socialise

the economy (Roth et al., 2020; Thompson, 2021). In doing so, municipalist initiatives are not limited to work in the state, but are also directed against its current form and can go beyond it (Cumbers, 2015). Two research projects on municipalism in Barcelona and Zagreb provide the primary data for the analytical peek through this empirical window, including 22 interviews with local councillors, supporters and NGO activists in Zagreb<sup>1</sup> and 30 interviews and participation in 10 group discussions with actors from social movements and municipal projects in Barcelona,<sup>2</sup> not all of which are used here (see Appendix 1 for a list of the interviews used). Additionally, the empirical base comprises newspaper articles and publications by the movements, as well as secondary data from existing research (for example, Angel, 2021; Blanco et al., 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2017; Rilović, 2017). Subsequently, using theory-oriented qualitative content analysis (Belfrage and Hauf, 2017), the material was condensed into the three categories of the ‘Strategic selectivities’ section, as these were emanating from our data and the theoretical foundations of materialist state theory (see Buckel and Oberndorfer, 2018; Hirsch, 2005; Jessop, 1990, 1999; Poulantzas, 2014).

Following Poulantzas (2014) and Jessop (1990, 1999), we conceptualise the state as a social relation and an arena of struggles. This arena is an uneven terrain: some actors and interests have greater chances to assert themselves owing to the structure of the capitalist state. This unevenness is expressed in the concept of strategic selectivity (see Jessop, 1999) upon which we draw for our two case studies. It reveals the interrelation of structure and agency and explicitly suggests strategies to change structures, making it a useful concept to explore the scope of action for municipalist projects and their transformative practice.

We first outline the theoretical frame with one focus on the configuration of the local scale. Further focal points lie on the feminisation of politics, and the connection between state and masculinity, and a last one on the temporalities of the state. We then introduce the contexts of our case studies and use the concept of strategic selectivities to analyse the realities encountered by the municipalist projects in Zagreb and Barcelona and their collective counter-strategies. Finally, we discuss the transformative potential of municipalist practice.

### **The materiality of the capitalist state**

In his remarks on the Paris Commune, Marx stated: ‘The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes’ (1871/1973: 336). The quote illustrates that the bourgeois state is not a neutral institution that represents the interests of society as a whole, but is a product of the capitalist mode of production. Poulantzas clarified that the capitalist state machinery is neither an autonomous subject nor a mere instrument in the hands of the ruling classes. Rather, the state represents a ‘specific material condensation of the relation of forces between classes and class fractions’ (Poulantzas, 2014: 129) with relative autonomy vis-à-vis particular economic (class) interests. Relative autonomy means that, in capitalist societies, the political sphere is not simply determined by the economy (see Jessop, 1990, 1999; Poulantzas, 2014). This relative autonomy is the precondition for the long-term organisation of the conditions of capital accumulation, which transcend the individual interests of competing capitals. The state stands outside of this immediate competition, organises common productive or financial infrastructures or grants material concessions to subaltern

actors, and struggles at the expense of certain capital fractions (for example, waiving a rent cap) (Poulantzas, 2014: 135, 143). As a tax state, it also has a material self-interest in the continuation of capital accumulation, depending on the appropriation of its share of the produced surplus value. In this sense, the autonomy of the political is always only relative (Hirsch, 2005: 33–34, 49). Rooted in the material structures of the capitalist mode of production, it develops its own materiality, displaying a particular inertia towards political interests that seek to change the underlying social power relations. This structure sustains the central function of the bourgeois state: to establish the conditions for the continuous reproduction of capitalist society, including political consensus and the organisation of a power bloc (Jessop, 1999: 46).

This materiality is reflected in specific patterns of strategic selectivities, that is, a set of institutional mechanisms that promote or block certain interests. These patterns ‘privilege the access of some forces over others, some strategies over others, some interests over others, some spatial and temporal horizons of action over others, and some coalition possibilities over others’ (Jessop, 1999: 54–55). The selectivities are (re-)produced through practices such as the filtering of information or systematic inaction on certain issues that would disturb the reproduction of society in its current form. Selectivities are emergent effects of interactions between past and present (hegemonic) patterns of domination and counter-hegemonic strategies and therefore changeable (Jessop, 1990: 261). Certain selectivities of the state become apparent only where political strategies challenge the status quo of asymmetrically privileged hegemonic interests, actions and actors. This explicit manifestation of strategic selectivities is what municipalist platforms encounter when they engage with the state and it is what we

examine in the empirical section. Before depicting the selectivities at work in Zagreb and Barcelona, a further theoretical specification is necessary. To ground the empirically analysed selectivities, we elaborate the local scale as the strategic target of municipalists’ transformative strategy, the masculine grammars of the state, since a major strategic element of municipalism is the feminisation of politics, and temporality as a central strategic structural selection, which emerged from our interviews.

### *The local scale in a context of neoliberalisation and centralisation*

The local state – as the central scale for the transformative approach of municipalism (Cumbers and Paul, 2020; Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2021) – is a ‘contradictory and historically changeable expression of societal relations’ (Krätke and Schmoll, 1987: 31). Moreover, the local state displays a relative autonomy in two respects: economically, cities depend on tax revenues and are thus tied to the development of the local economy; politically, the municipal level is integrated in a structure of statehood and thus dependent on supra-local scales (Schipper, 2013: 42). Its autonomous scope for action becomes visible in potential local class alliances that might pursue projects opposing the dynamics of capital accumulation (Harvey, 1989: 152–154). The local scale is thus also a social relation and an arena of struggles. Understanding scale as the ‘spatial manifestation of social power relations’ (Brand et al., 2011: 154), we can ask at which scale social conflicts are negotiated and who can exert decisive control at this level (McDowell, 2001: 229). This contested nature became evident in the course of the 2008 economic crisis, when austerity policies were made permanent, particularly biting in cities (Peck, 2012: 629) and extending ‘the neoliberal project to reorganize the

institutional matrix and balance of forces in favour of capital' (Jessop, 2016: 417). Whereas responsibilities were offloaded to the local, fiscal and political decision-making powers were simultaneously centralised at the nation-state and supranational levels (Theodore, 2020). At the same time, cities became 'staging grounds for ... progressive forms of counter-politics' (Peck, 2012: 651). Centralisation is then a strategy that determines the scale at which decisions are made, and neoliberalisation is a strategy determining which set of actors and sectors are privileged: public/private, institutions/organised collectives, finance/construction/(re)production related workers. Both are thus scale-related strategies inscribing a certain selectivity into the local level (for a discussion on neoliberal/centralising re-scaling, see Bayırbağ, 2013; Jenss, 2019). Approaching scale as a social relation and materialisation of conflicts allows us to think of place-specific local counter-power. Developing such municipalist counter-power entails confrontations with neoliberal, centralised selectivities: turning the local into the privileged scale at which decisions about 'urban everyday' concerns take place; finding strategies to resist ongoing adaptation to the requirements of capital accumulation; utilising this scale to produce wider shifts in the balance of forces and their condensation in the state machinery.<sup>3</sup>

### *Masculine grammars of the capitalist state*

Municipalist actors not only seek to turn the local into a strategic scale for transformative practice, but do so with an explicit focus on gender relations, reflecting the strong feminist movements of the past decade: 'municipalist organisations are ... taking the lead in feminising politics or doing their best to drive things forward' (Roth et al., 2020: 6).<sup>4</sup> This comprises at least three elements: feminist policies, gender balance and instituting

new ways of doing politics in a feminist way (Roth et al., 2020: 7; Russell, 2019: 1000–1006). This strategy rests on an often implicit problematisation of the masculine grammars of institutions (Sauer, 2001). These grammars are reproduced by a specific set of gendered selectivities of the capitalist state and it is useful to conceptualise these selectivities to understand the depth of the challenge.

When rooting the state within the capitalist mode of production, capitalism must be understood as 'dirty... in that it is a multiple relation of domination' (Buckel and Oberndorfer, 2018: 41), including patriarchal or racist supremacy. Gendered divisions (most prominently the private/public divide on which all modern states depend, see Sauer, 2001) structure institutions, state bureaucracy and the orientation of state policies. From a historical materialist perspective, we assume a 'grammar of the masculinity of institutions' (Sauer, 2001: 141). Such grammars perpetuate gender inequalities. They are written into the institutional materiality of the state and constitute strategic selectivities that privilege hegemonically masculine behaviour, manifesting in men occupying positions of power, a culture of objectified masculinity and the preferential representation of male interests. State apparatuses in their masculine effects are an 'intricate grid of often conflicting strategies, technologies, and discourses of power' (Brown, 1992: 14). However, the multi-scalar set of regulations, programmes and discourses through which the state organises the appropriation of the un(der)paid social reproductive work of women and queers can be interrupted by movements articulating feminist demands (Ludwig, 2018: 33). As we will show, using the local scale as an entry point for such confrontation provokes the explicit manifestation of gendered selectivities, which significantly shape this scale in its structural interweaving with gendered divisions of labour. Its

institutions embody masculinist grammars, which municipalist – as feminist – projects run up against.

### *Temporality and neoliberal timescapes*

A last dimension of selectivities that emerged from the dialogue between our empirical material and the theoretical foundations is the question of temporality. Bob Jessop emphasised that the state, as an ensemble of institutions, privileges not only some actors and interests but also ‘some ... temporal horizons ... over others’ (1999: 51). Capturing the dominant temporal horizon of the past decade, Gillan identifies a ‘neoliberal timescape’ as a solidified pattern of ‘spatio-temporal boundaries’ that movements run up against (Gillan, 2020). The conflicting time regimes of social movements as complexly structured collective actors (on the procedures of deliberative democracy in the Spanish *acampadas*, see, for example, Della Porta, 2016: 207ff.) and institutions, which are at least formally organised as hierarchical organisations with clearly defined procedures of decision-making, has been addressed – although often more implicitly – in research on movements and institutionalisation (for an ontological reflection on the temporality of struggles and representative democracy, see Lorey, 2014). Our research underpins that the rhythm of the neoliberalised masculine state machinery often collides with the temporal horizons of municipalist movements. Genuine political time has been shrinking, where decisions are outsourced to expert bodies, informal economic-political circles and the realms of the opaque executive (Hirsch, 2005). However, the municipalist efforts precisely aim to extend political time, aiming for ‘constructive temporality’ (Lorey, 2014), that is, to include deliberation and participation by default, to strengthen legislative and transparent institutions and participatory

mechanisms. The selectivities of neoliberal timescapes contradict such temporal utopias, as we will illustrate below.

### **Municipalist practice: Interruptions in the state machinery**

Having sketched our theoretical approach, we introduce the context within which ZJN and BeC emerged and then present the empirical results. The data have been collected in separate research projects but comparability is enabled by their similar theoretical frameworks (materialist perspective on municipalism), the ‘shared processes affecting ... different places’ (austerity urbanism) and the ‘concrete universals’ (local state) (Robinson, 2016: 11), as well as the research methods (primarily interviews) and evaluation methods (qualitative content analysis). In this, we are looking for resonances as ‘different elements, dynamics and relations could be recognised from one case to another’ (Lund, 2014: 226), which can help to generalise the results. Both Barcelona and Zagreb are nowadays, after decades of a political stalemate, governed by municipalist platforms. Although BeC and ZJN differ concerning their role in the city government and the general political constellation, they provide valuable insights into the (dys-)functionalities of the state and municipalist counter-strategies. Both have evolved from urban struggles in a context of semi-peripheral crisis politics and entered the formal institutional terrain of the local state a few years ago.

### *Urban struggles in Southern and South-Eastern Europe*

Following the 2008 rupture of a global crisis of capitalist accumulation, the EU and national governments, including those of Spain and Croatia, imposed ‘a raft of

austerity measures: public spending cuts shrinking the welfare state, marketization, tax cuts for businesses and intensified workfare' (Davies and Blanco, 2017: 1521). The crisis management and its socially devastating consequences were met by mass protests and social movements around health, education, housing and labour rights, particularly in the European semi-periphery (Bailey et al., 2018; Balković, 2019). In both Barcelona and Zagreb, new democratic practices developed in occupations of squares (Dolenec et al., 2017; Purcell, 2021). But, despite the massive extent of the protests, especially in Spain, national and local governments remained rigorous in their policies of budget discipline, that is, (urban) austerity (Davies and Blanco, 2017: 1523).

The non-responsiveness of the state provoked a change of strategy by movement actors: with the founding of municipalist platforms all over Spain, they aimed to channel contentious energy into the local state institutions (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). Inspired by the 2011 occupations of squares and movements against neoliberal policies, in 2014 BeC announced its participation in the upcoming municipal elections. The intention was to break through the 'institutional blockade from above' (Guanyem Barcelona, 2014). The municipalist platform immediately won about 175,000 votes (25%), becoming the strongest force in the City Council, and Ada Colau, former spokesperson of the Spanish anti-eviction movement, became mayor of Barcelona. In spring 2017, when BeC had already been in office for two years, the platform Zagreb Je NAŠ! (ZJN) was formed in the capital of Croatia shortly before the local elections, following the model of Spanish municipalism. Owing to personal political bonds from the degrowth movement, solidarity economy gatherings (interview Z3) and other transnational spaces, there was a flow of ideas and practices between Barcelona and Zagreb. After

more than a decade of non-parliamentary activism, ecological struggles, student protests, trade union work and right-to-the-city mobilisation, ZJN's dual structure as a party and a platform aims to ensure an open arrangement, because political parties are heavily discredited (Vidović and Pauković, 2011: 105). Through an online platform and discussions with local residents, ZJN developed its programme of democratising the city and ran an unusual election campaign (Rilović, 2017). In May 2017, in a coalition with four other left and green political actors, it received 7.6% of the vote and constituted the 'left bloc' in the City Assembly, with 4 out of 51 seats, and gained 62 representatives in district and neighbourhood councils. It was the first time that a progressive alliance had entered local state institutions in Zagreb.

Another two years later, in 2019, BeC's first institutional cycle ended with the municipal elections, when it lost almost 5% of the vote and one seat on the City Council. Still, Ada Colau was re-elected as mayor with the support of the Socialists' Party of Catalonia (PSC) and the liberal pro-Spanish candidate. Since the 2021 local elections in Zagreb, both cities are currently governed by a municipalist platform in a coalition with social democratic parties – the PSC in Barcelona and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in Zagreb. Both mayors come from the municipalist platform. Shortly before ZJN's first institutional cycle ended, in February 2021, long-term mayor Milan Bandić died of a heart attack before competing for a seventh term. In the regular local elections of May 2021, ZJN considerably increased its electoral share, holding 23 out of 47 seats in the City Assembly, and ZJN's candidate Tomislav Tomašević received 65.25% in the second round of the mayoral election.<sup>5</sup>

We now turn to what the different municipalist confrontations with the local state's strategic selectivities actually look like and

what collective strategies have emerged in response.

## Strategic selectivities

### *Centralisation/neoliberalisation*

The time span of our research covers different phases in the development of the municipalist platforms in Zagreb and Barcelona: whereas BeC has been in government from the very beginning, ZJN entered the institutional arena as a small opposition before winning the elections in 2021. However, the local state machinery appeared closed in both cases, where centralisation and neoliberalisation have cultivated structures, processes and a balance of forces hostile to the municipalist project of democratisation and social inclusivity.

The spatial structure of the Spanish state and Barcelona's integration into global capital cycles create contradictory conditions for the municipalist approach. After Franco's dictatorship, Spain was decentralised in the late 1970s, giving extensive responsibilities mainly to the regions but also to municipalities. At the same time, the municipalities' scope on topics such as migration, housing or labour law is limited, because central competences lie with the regions and the national state. The principle of financial self-sufficiency applied, with the local level receiving meagre economic transfers from upper administrative levels, thus having to finance services through direct revenues such as taxes (Blanco and Gomà, 2019: 57).

In the town hall, BeC members were confronted with a local state that had been shaped into a neoliberal growth machine over the preceding decades. The so-called *Model Barcelona* or *Marca Barcelona* (interview B2) relies on accumulation fed by the real estate economy, tourism, culture and foreign investments. Other features are the powerful influence of economic elites, an

extensively outsourced public sector and the progressive marginalisation of citizen participation (interview B2; Blanco et al., 2020). Although Barcelona's fiscal situation has been relatively good, with low levels of debt and a large budget, financial and legislative constraints imposed through austerity policies severely limited the room for manoeuvre (Davies, 2021: 74ff., Gillespie, 2020: 28–29). Thereby, the consequences of the crisis were passed to the local scale, where cities acted as a 'fire extinguisher' for the structural problems of financial capitalism (interview B4). Furthermore, only a quarter of the deputies in the city hall in each legislative period belonged to BeC, presenting immense challenges in terms of political power and the councillors' workloads (interview B9). To gain more scope for action, they had to enter coalitions with established political actors. This led to 'decaffeinated politics' (interview B4), in which policies were defused in relation to expectations raised by the movement's capture of city hall.

Such strategic selectivities are similar to Zagreb, where a major impediment to the democratisation efforts of the municipalist platform is the high level of centralisation of the Croatian state and its capital, marginalising neighbourhood and district councils who thus have very little room for manoeuvre (Alibegović and Slijepčević, 2012). Since 2009, the mayor is directly elected as the sole head of the executive with a range of exclusive rights. This quasi-presidential system has resulted in executive-heavy, corruption-prone local government regimes (Hoffmann et al., 2017). Instead of the supposedly greater democratic permeability of the local state, this constellation has grown into a materially condensed thicket of processes that operate in favour of the status quo.

Almost all interviewees, who, as members of ZJN, are new to the institutional terrain,



expressed bewilderment at how a complex network of micro-institutions turned out to be ‘a puppet show’ (interview Z8). Although many were aware of their scarce decision-making authority, they still imagined that certain things could be decided. After all, as the new council members quickly learned, papers are sent back and forth each month, upon which a series of votes are based: ‘Rhetorically and on paper it seems like you have some power, ... but in practice: everything is really centralised’ (interview Z1). The experience of powerlessness, despite being kept busy by bureaucracy, caught many of the new councillors off guard. The first two years were restrained by the painful realisation that ‘you can’t really do anything’ (interview Z4). Every ZJN initiative, for example the attempt to stop relevant changes to the General Urban Plan intended to enable a gigantic construction project at the expense of public space,<sup>6</sup> perished through the lower levels’ lack of competence or non-transparent agreements between long-established councillors. According to many ZJN members, such councillors were mostly irritated by the newcomers, who questioned everything, invited citizens to council meetings and engaged in protest actions, for example for the defence of parks (interviews Z4, Z6, Z9). The range of possible action is greatly limited: ‘I can only criticise and vote against, that is it basically’ (interview Z11). The ZJN councillors found themselves in ‘a charade’ (interview Z9), not at the root of some bottom-up local democracy. Not only is the centralised set-up undemocratic in terms of its opacity, but it presents the material condensation of the specific experience of neoliberalisation in post-socialist cities. Privatisation and deregulation have enabled local patronage networks, which can scarcely be held accountable because of the actual powerlessness of representative bodies (see Hoffmann et al., 2017).

*Counter-strategies.* Both initiatives can be characterised as what Thompson calls ‘platform municipalism’, envisioning new democratic structures (Thompson, 2021). BeC created new instruments of participation, such as the participatory budget and initiatives allowing citizens to submit proposals directly to the authorities (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2021; Decidim, 2021). This was first applied in February 2019, when a residents’ initiative targeting the expansion of a health centre presented their demands to the City Council (interview B9). The plenary vote on the proposal was not compulsory, but forced members to take a stance. This shows a change in the concept of participation, from creating consensus to generating social conflicts (B6).

One strategy to expand local power and regain control over the local economy and resources is the (re-)municipalisation of public services. Between 2015 and 2019, the city of Barcelona re-municipalised infrastructures such as childcare and the maintenance of street trees. Furthermore, the City Council approved over 2400 public jobs in the first term, the most ever. The positions primarily cover gaps left by cuts in recent decades and replace temporary contracts. Large-scale initiatives, such as the re-municipalisation of the water supply or the founding of the municipal electricity provider Barcelona Energia, encountered political, legal and institutional obstacles on different scales (interview B9). They failed or had not (yet) fully achieved the desired extent of democratisation (Angel, 2021; March et al., 2019).

ZJN too promotes an ideal of democracy and a strengthening of economic control at the local level, which both rest on decentralised decision-making structures in the face of the neoliberal and executive-focused urban regime (see Bua and Davies 2023): ‘You need to have a clear programme of decentralisation, removing hierarchies,

putting real financial and other decision-making powers back into the hands of citizens' (interview Z5). ZJN wants to limit mayors' terms of office and strengthen the power of the city parliament and district and neighbourhood councils. Moreover, it aims to build up parallel economic institutions controlled by consumers and workers: 'Everything is in the ownership of banks. In this situation, we are not able to do anything. So, we can do it parallel – we should enter the parliaments, but we need to work on this parallel system' (interview Z9). Cooperatives (in former Yugoslavia: *Zadrugas*), like other remnants of the socialist past, suffer from a negative image. This is because of experiences of hierarchical decision-making structures contrary to participatory promises, and owing to the anti-communist narratives after the end of the civil wars: 'The cooperative tradition was quite strong and then the wars dismantled it completely during the 90s. So we have to reinvent the whole thing' (interview Z7). International solidarity economy networks and renewed global interest in the cooperative model have revived this debate in Croatia (interview Z5). ZJN members are involved in the founding of the Ethical Bank (Etična Banka), based on a cooperative with more than 1400 members, the largest of its kind in Croatia (*Zadruga za etično financiranje*). Parallel to political democratisation, the microcosm around ZJN thus also works towards restructuring the economy to democratise money flows.

### *Masculine grammars in practice*

In terms of the masculine grammar of local institutions, it speaks for itself that Ada Colau is the first female among Barcelona's 118 mayors. Masculinities permeate the materiality of the institution in a double sense. In terms of architecture, the thick

walls, long corridors and high plenary halls block intimacy and collectivity (Zechner, 2020: 126). In the sense of materiality as repetitive actions, there have been recurrent complaints of sexist behaviour towards BeC members (interview B10). Laura Pérez, Councillor for Feminism and LGBTI, reports derogatory remarks towards younger women: 'In the middle of the meeting they call you sweetheart' (Faus, 2017). Gala Pin, former Councillor for Participation, describes a situation where she was kissed on the forehead as a greeting by the president of an executive committee: He 'kissed me on the forehead without batting an eyelid. This could not have started any worse. Unequal treatment based on gender, age and class' (Pin, 2016). While Pin scandalised this incident in a newspaper column, Pérez insisted on naming her office in order to avoid a gender-specific address: 'Although I didn't like my title as councillor at first, I defend it now. I prefer councillor to sweetheart, honey, darling' (Faus, 2017).

Zagreb too is characterised by masculine grammars concerning the personnel of the local administration and its public performances. Milan Bandić, the long-term mayor who died in 2021, displayed an extreme version of the free-floating, omnipotent politician. He was the embodiment of a political culture that devalues deliberation and cooperative solutions. His legitimacy was built around him being a dynamic boss taking decisions – in his words: 'I solve the problems of the people, 16 hours per day!' (quoted in Roser, 2010). His authoritarian populist style is a product of a capitalist patriarchal society and has left marks on the political fabric. In the neighbourhood and district councils, female members of ZJN report paternalistic, sexist behaviour to be common: 'They are really rude to me, ... yelling at me, they are patronising, it is really like this, old men. I think they can just not

imagine that a woman is talking about something ... and that they should listen' (interview Z9).

With regard to questions of gender-related infrastructure, Barcelona's municipal government faced a neoliberal conservative gender regime implemented by the EU and the Spanish state (Lombardo and Alonso, 2020). The austerity measures dismantled public health services and cut support for parents and educational spending. In addition, the deficit cap affected the ability of local governments to invest in social services (interview B3). This was flanked by a masculinised restructuring of the state apparatus – the Ministry of Gender Equality was abolished in 2010 – and a political campaign by the conservative ruling party, Partido Popular, attacking women's bodily autonomy (Campillo Poza, 2018).

Despite a different historical and geographical path, the situation looks similar in Zagreb. Like many post-socialist cities, it displays a neoliberalised urban care system, which neglects and devalues social reproduction. In 2018, the city budget included limited investment in public kindergartens (12 million Kuna), while almost twice as much (21 million) was allocated to monuments (HINA, 2018). The poor funding of public infrastructure is also notable in terms of employees' wages. At the end of 2019, 90% of publicly employed teachers in primary and secondary education went on strike because this sector, employing many women, has been hardest hit by austerity programmes (Salzmann, 2019).

*Counter-strategies.* The patriarchal culture of the (local) state is tackled by both BeC and ZJN with their practice of feminising politics, encompassing the promotion of women in political spaces, the struggle to implement feminist policies and a change of political culture (Roth et al., 2020: 7).

In the May 2017 local elections in Zagreb, ZJN was the first political actor ever to use lists with at least 50% women, using the zipper system (lists alternate between genders, no two men are allowed consecutively): 'It was a big breakthrough ..., because even in left groups women tend to be let down' (interview Z1). These lists and thus women entering local state institutions created opportunities to engage in decision-making structures previously occupied by men: 'This opened up space for women to talk about things that before only men did' (interview Z9). The lower levels of the state machinery have proven to be a rather sheltered realm owing to their relative media invisibility, which provides the opportunity to make up for decades of women being kept away from public office: 'You have space and time to slowly learn and gain self-confidence – it's a learning space, step by step' (interview Z9).

Besides similar such strategies, BeC also tries to structurally feminise politics. The idea is to anchor feminist issues in city politics, to have parity in office and to break with masculine logics based on hierarchy, individualisation, competition and visibility (Galcerán Huguet and Carmona Pascual, 2017). These are countered by a policy that promotes horizontal structures of collective leadership, focusing on the everyday and caring for each other (interview B7). Although they consistently carry out equal representation in the city hall faction and in the working groups, the break with classical models of representation is contradictory. This becomes evident because the representatives often neglect their own health and social environment in favour of politics. A councillor from Sants sees this as adapting to the system: 'I don't think we have been able to protect ... our personal lives any better .... Because you become more and more a political machine, inside an institution ..., and that separates you from reality, and you end up

becoming exactly what you criticised' (interview B4).

The field of representation also reflects processes that run counter to actual ambitions. The representation of BeC is tailored to Ada Colau. A BeC spokesperson sees this as a 'necessary contradiction' because a figurehead is needed and at least it is not an elderly white man (interview B1). A member of the Sants neighbourhood assembly speaks more critically: 'Ada is Leo Messi. She is great and you have Leo Messi, but you have to play for him' (interview B5). The collective project is thus neglected in favour of a single figurehead.

Similarly, ZJN is centred around a few integrative figures, for example Tomislav Tomašević, the head of the left bloc and since 2021 mayor of the city. He describes the colliding logics of representative politics and the struggle for feminisation:

Then again, I was the candidate as a man .... We had gender parity on the list ..., and we try to see it more broadly than representation, talking about weaknesses. Sometimes I am criticised by ... people who say I am too emotional. But ... we think politics should be emotional. ... So that for us is also feminising politics, ... say that you don't know everything, which is also contradictory, because sometimes you cannot, because you're supposed to represent a much bigger movement and sometimes you cannot say, we don't know what to do. (Interview Z2)

Besides representational issues, members of ZJN, as trade unionists, also engage in struggles for better working conditions in the care and educational sectors. They have been involved in organising teachers and kindergarten employees in their fight for better wages and some of the labour activists have been elected to neighbourhood councils. ZJN thus attempts to connect matters of social reproduction, labour struggles and political struggles in order to overcome the

structural materiality of divided spheres of private and public life (interview Z4).

Driven by an even stronger feminist movement than in Croatia, BeC enforced explicit support for comparable gender-specific issues. The programme *Ciudad cuidadora* aims to recognise the socioeconomic value of mostly unpaid reproductive labour and promotes the democratisation of care. The city hall produced a 68-point action plan, ranging from the creation of new kindergartens to the strengthening of feminist perspectives in the solidarity economy sector (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2017). Other measures included the re-municipalisation of outsourced services, the introduction of a legal framework to guarantee gender equality in the municipal sphere and public contracts, and an increase in gender-specific budgets (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2018; interview B10).

In interaction with movements, the city government strengthened feminist issues discursively, materially and within the local state machinery. This opened up the local scale for feminist interests and shifted strategic selectivities towards gender justice. However, there are still serious limitations to the municipal scope for action; besides the limited budget, this relates to legislation at a higher level, for example regarding the precarious housing situation or immigration law, which strongly affects the situation of women (interview B3).

### *Conflicting temporalities*

Regarding the strategic selectivities of conflicting temporal horizons, in Zagreb the institutional machinery is both extremely static and overwhelmingly rapid. Before ZJN was elected into government, the city had been caught in a stalemate for almost two decades: 'You have the same mayor and the same people around him ... since 2000' (interview Z5). After such a long time, the

institutions have developed little independence; instead they 'are made for this kind of regime' (interview Z1). New political actors, such as ZJN, are confronted with an unknown rhythm, while driven by the desire to change as much as possible, as quickly as possible: 'Now that we got into these institutions it is like a big wave over us, everything is happening now and we have to make our own filters .... We have to see, prioritise, choose' (interview Z1). Another interviewee describes how a huge amount of time is needed to survive the institutional mechanisms: 'It's really hard. So just the session [of the City Assembly] is 24 hours and then you have committees and working group sessions and you have club sessions [of the left bloc], you have consultations with other clubs, lobbying with the administration' (interview Z2).

Established actors not only have experience of the amount of paperwork, calls and information, but are equipped with personnel to navigate the labyrinth. The clientelistic network that constitutes the local state in Zagreb works in their favour and against challengers such as ZJN, and time pressure just grows for those trying to tackle the gridlocked, informal and formal coalitions in the local councils.

Although some of the BeC staff had experience of these institutional codes, the complexity and hierarchy of the local state machinery was still overwhelming (interviews B6, B10). The necessary learning processes were under constant attack from opposition parties, the media and economic actors. Global companies have repeatedly sued the city government, and fake news on social and traditional media consistently discredits BeC (interviews B1, B7, B9). The bureaucratic rhythms and parliamentary constraints themselves impede a longer learning phase. It takes several years to pass from the idea to the decision and implementation of certain policies, but the ruling

party must be able to show success within the legislative period. Barcelona's chief architect notes in this regard: 'Maybe the first time that you arrive at the administration you need to learn that you have to make decisions at the beginning of the term because you don't have enough time to carry them out' (interview B8). These long implementation times cause discontent among actors who are used to the rhythms of social movements:

The time that all this takes is hard. I used to be in movements where you discuss, decide and then do it almost immediately. In administrative time, nothing is done in less than half a year or a year. In the beginning it was very, very frustrating. (Interview B9).

Despite a relative openness of the social-democrat-influenced city administration towards the municipalist project, the structures and timings of the administrative apparatuses and the civil servants' ways of working remain shaped by years of neoliberal knowledge production and timescapes and are difficult to translate into more collective and horizontal practices (interviews B6, B10).

*Counter-strategies.* In Zagreb, the daily time suddenly consumed by council work also had an individualising effect. Councillors felt overwhelmed by expectations that they were unable to fulfil given their vanishing decision competencies: 'You realise that you did take responsibility for something and for someone, it is not the same as before' (interview Z9). This is why, after about two years of being absorbed in the individualising time scape of the institutional machine, councillors started to coordinate in a bi-weekly meeting of all ZJN council members, countering the time pressure and loneliness enforced by representative politics: 'We have to tackle this together, as a campaign, not

individually, and we started to do this' (interview Z9). This has eased the structurally enforced loneliness of representative politics, where a person stands accountable with a name and face.

Similar experiences have been made in Barcelona: whereas the machinery is often too slow in implementing new policies, it seems to work too fast for the establishment of more horizontal structures. Inside the institutions, attempts to transfer a more horizontal assembly-based style of politics to the districts failed owing to the amount and complexity of information, as well as the dense rhythm of everyday institutional life (interview B4). In addition, strengthening the connection between the inside and the outside of institutions has failed because of these rhythms. For example, the BeC extra-parliamentary neighbourhood groups, supposedly the organisation's anchors in the neighbourhoods, meet every fortnight, which makes it difficult to transport and discuss the large amount of information and complex knowledge accruing from daily parliamentary work. This has led to a greater verticalisation of knowledge and decision-making and hindered collective decision-making processes. Thus, institutional rhythms have thwarted stronger linkages between parliamentary discussions and grassroots groups and created distance between institutional and extra-parliamentary activists (interview B4).

Therefore, 'revolution in public administration' (interview B6) is an important future task. In some places, hierarchies in daily interaction and in parts of the administrative structure could be reduced, for example by strengthening the councils in the city districts (interview B9). In terms of knowledge production, it was possible to break through certain barriers, especially through cooperation with 'experts' from social movements.

For example, architecture and urban planning collectives such as La Hidra Cooperativa were central actors in the elaboration of the *Patrimonio Ciudadana* programme. This new body was created in dialogue with the City Council's Department of Participation and Territory, neighbourhood activists and lawyers, and it is intended to make public resources available for self-managed and collective use (interview B6) (see Bianchi 2023). Such alliances can bridge the different temporalities between movements and institutions, shift the logic of administrative apparatuses and translate political demands into concrete policies.

Instead of simply adapting to the time regime of institutional politics, the municipalist actors in Barcelona and Zagreb attempted to create frictions in the temporal selectivities, which currently serve particularistic interests. In Zagreb, being a small oppositional force from 2017 to 2021, they extended political time horizons by not just voting agendas through but discussing salient occurrences of clientelism. These would otherwise have been brushed aside through the usual compression of debates, which protects the patronage networks. Even though, after only four years of navigating the state's temporal matrix, they have not been able to build institutions enabling time for democratic self-management, they have selectively opened up the state machinery and drawn attention to how institutions are closed off from social struggles. By pursuing such disruptive temporal strategies, ZJN was able to revive the ideal of active oppositional work and was frequently referred to as the leader of the opposition in the city parliament (for example, Pavičić, 2019), despite having only four councillors. It proved that it would not simply bend to the temporal selectivities and it thus gained the trust of Zagreb's population. This translated

into a major electoral success in 2021 and fundamentally shifted the balance of forces in the city's institutions.

## Conclusion

The examples of municipalism from Barcelona and Zagreb had different conditions of agency in the period analysed here, but grappled with what we have analysed as different strategic selectivities of the capitalist state: neoliberalisation/centralisation, masculine grammars and temporalities.

These selectivities are connected and mutually reinforcing. The timescape is an obstacle to democratisation and decentralisation, and it is generated by processes of centralisation and neoliberalisation. Local power relations – for example, long-term public–private partnerships, state apparatuses or ‘old boy networks’ – make it impossible to govern consistently against the material condensation of capitalist imperatives and the political and economic elites defending the status quo. Moreover, regional, national or supranational laws block progressive local initiatives.

The temporal rhythm, the amount of information, the associated expertise and the modes of decision-making in the institutions impede stronger linking of parliamentary processes with more horizontal structures of municipalist movements. The selectivities of the capitalist (local) state systematically devalue the collective capital of social movements, creating a distance between the (collective) outside and the (more hierarchical, masculine) inside. On an individual level, stress and responsibility are reinforced by an equidistance, ‘as being at a distance from both movements and institutional habitus, is to be lost, to be nowhere’ (Zechner, 2020: 161). Thus, these selectivities undermine the concept of movement parties.

Both BeC and ZJN, although starting from different conditions, attempt to counter these selectivities by creating a more

feminist, horizontal politics and genuine democratic timescapes within the institutions.

BeC went straight into government in a challenging minority government, whereas ZJN in the first four years of its institutional presence acted as a small opposition. This arrangement gave it more room for manoeuvre. Being less exposed, it used more disruptive tactics, trying to interrupt regular parliamentary processes, address citizens' issues and publicly expose the corrupt networks that had been established for decades. Though it had very little scope for action, it had more time to learn about the state machinery. BeC instead was in the spotlight from the very beginning. Limited in its coalition, it still contested the discourse of the city as a growth machine and addressed subaltern and feminist concerns, partially inscribing them into the strategic selectivities of the local state. In order to safeguard these changes, BeC is attempting to establish new (but not conflict-free) forms of cooperation with social movements, use alternative forms of administrative knowledge production, implement re-municipalisation, and strengthen the common good. In this way, the municipalist projects were able to leave their trace on the materiality of the (local) state at various points. Through adopting an electoral strategy, the platforms decided to crack open the opaque system of financial favours and mutual benefits to make the institutions more accessible. '[T]hese strategic engagements with the local state' must, as we have illustrated, not be read 'as a consensus or as the resolution of the long-standing challenges movements face when engaging with constituted state power' (Russell, 2019: 999). Instead, they challenged the selectivities of the local state machinery by organising participation as conflict, scandalising the serving of particularistic interests, making public sexist behaviour within the masculine apparatuses, and forming new alliances with feminist and subaltern actors. All this

changes the dynamics of institutions and the relationship of forces reproduced by and reproducing the ensemble of state institutions.

Still, a machine whose strategic selectivity has been shaped by decades of neoliberalism cannot be changed overnight – municipalist projects often find themselves ‘[e]ntrapped by (territorial) state logics and disciplined by the (relational) law of (capitalist) value’ (Thompson, 2021: 334). From a materialist perspective, obstacles faced by municipalist projects are not the result only of local specificities or strategic mistakes. One must reckon with the structure of the state and its strategic selectivities. Frustration and disengagement are inevitable if the focus is on ad hoc changes instead of slow ‘collaborative, incremental ... radical-reformism’ (Thompson, 2021: 336). The findings deepen Davies’s insights about the ‘resilience of capitalist state apparatuses to counter-politics’ (2021: 177), which block progressive transformations. This, in turn, has a decisive influence on the dynamics, structure and content of the municipal projects. The initial euphoria about the municipalist movements reclaiming city halls was significantly tempered by this reality. BeC’s more radical approach during the movement phase has been severely ground down during the recent years of institutional politics. ZJN is facing similar and new obstacles as a governing party.

However, in conceptualising the (local) state as an ensemble of institutions with relative autonomy vis-à-vis particularistic interests, there is always room for manoeuvre for counter-hegemonic struggles, which modify everyday rhythms and routines as well as subjectivities (Thompson, 2021: 334), shift discourses about the direction of the local state, and plan, enforce and implement more equitable policies in a long-term process. Such alterations cannot be re-programmed from above. Only under the painful, sometimes overwhelming, pressure of extra-

institutional forces and social movements, coupled with incursions into the institutions, will the routines of the local state machinery change. The examples of ZJN and BeC show that these interventions make a difference in terms of discrediting the status quo and envisioning another future.

Despite all criticism, Barcelona is still the product of strong movements whose contentious energy leaked into the institutions and represents an internationally recognised point of reference. ZJN managed to become the leading left–green political force in the city after the first institutional cycle. Its steady work in the local councils from 2017 to 2021 convinced the city’s population that municipalist practice is a credible alternative to the gridlock of authoritarian neoliberal corruption. These approaches can be seen as counter-hegemonic strategies against the patterns of strategic selectivities of the crisis-ridden neoliberal and masculinist state.


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### Notes

1. Conducted by Norma Tiedemann, denoted as Z1–*n* hereafter.
2. Conducted by Martin Sarnow, denoted as B1–*n* hereafter.



3. Owing to restrictions of space, this point cannot be dealt with explicitly here. For corresponding approaches, see, for example, Roth and Russell (2018).
4. Depending on the specific context and history, other forms of subjugation and exclusion are also tackled by municipalist platforms. In the US-American South, for example, it is anti-Black racism that is central to the emancipatory struggle of the initiative Cooperation Jackson, Mississippi: <https://cooperationjackson.org/>
5. Our research mainly took place prior to the May 2021 election and thus in the case of Zagreb covers the period of oppositional politics from 2017 to 2021 before ZJN was elected into the government.
6. See the reports written by a ZJN neighbourhood council member (Zagreb je NAŠ!, 2019).

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## Appendix

### Interviews

- Z1: Two ZJN members of neighbourhood councils, 06.04.2018

- Z2: ZJN member of city parliament, 07.04.2018
- Z3: ZJN member, 18.09.2018
- Z4: ZJN member of neighbourhood council, 18.09.2018
- Z5: ZJN member, 18.09.2018
- Z6: ZJN member of district council, 19.09.2018
- Z7: ZJN member, 24.02.2019
- Z8: ZJN member, 25.02.2019
- Z9: ZJN member of neighbourhood council, 25.02.2019
- Z10: ZJN member of neighbourhood council, 28.02.2019
- Z11: ZJN member of neighbourhood council, 18.03.2020
- B1: Group discussion with a spokesperson of BeC in the context of an educational trip of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 26.09.2018
- B2: Two city councillors of the Candidatura d'Unitat Popular, 08.04.2019
- B3: Member of La Ciutat Invisible, 11.04.2019
- B4: BeC district councillor, 24.04.2019
- B5: Participant of the district assembly Sants en Comú, 21.05.2019
- B6: Former advisor to Barcelona City Council in the Participation Department, 16.03.2021
- B7: Member of the Coordinadora General of BeC, 23.03.2021
- B8: Chief Architect of Barcelona, 14.04.2021
- B9: Advisor to Barcelona City Council in the Participation Department, 27.04.2021
- B10: Former BeC district councillor, 27.07.2021