

Barcelona, Fearless Cities and the New Municipalism

Ismael Blanco, Ricard Gomà

“Struggles over austerity and its alternatives seem set to exhibit an intensely urban form, as cities become beachheads and staging grounds for both tax revanchism and progressive forms of counter-politics”



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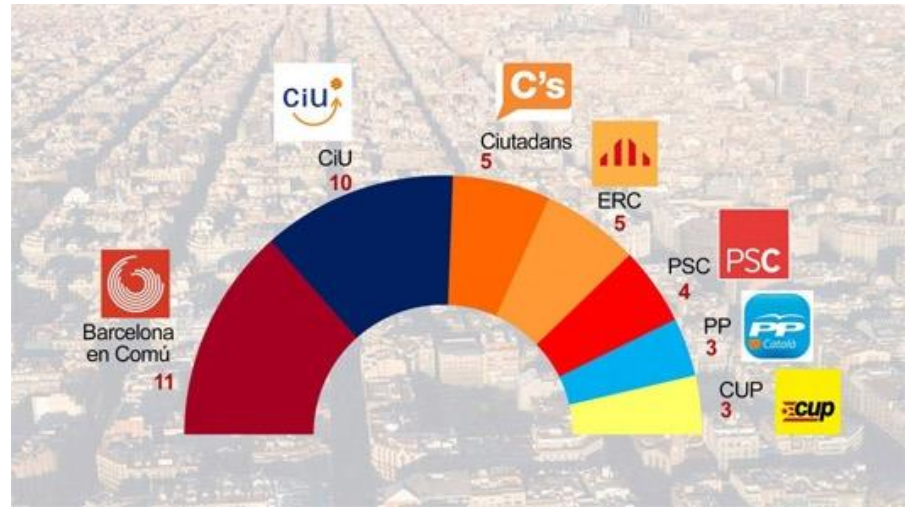
AUSTERITY URBANISM

The Neoliberal Crisis of American Cities

By Jamie Peck

Barcelona as a paradigmatic case study

- Since May 2015: city government run by Barcelona en Comú (radical left)
- City Mayor: Ada Colau (former leader of the anti-housing eviction movement)
- Many social / community activists (and critical scholars) occupying important political and administrative positions in the City Council
- Representing the raise of a new municipalist left (*candidaturas del cambio*) all across Spain
- Part of a global, wave of insurgencies spread since 2011 in different cities all across the world (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017)



Key questions

- Why these political alternatives to austerity came about?
- What is their political agenda and what kind of barriers do they face when they are in office?
- What are the prospects and the main challenges they must face in the near future?

On the conditions favouring radical political change

- The intensity of the **socio-economic crisis** and of subsequent austerity policies
- The **multidimensional/structural character of the 'crisis'** (a strong political dimension)
- The emergence of a **new 'social subject'**, the 'youth precariat', as a result of process of job and housing precarisation, empowered by high education achievement and digital social networks
- A long **tradition of progressive social and political movements** with a strong municipalist orientation
- The development of a rich **informal coalitions** between emergent social actors (PAH, Guanyem Barcelona...) and social and political organisations of the urban left (ICV, FAVB...)
- The development and the success of a **new left populist discourse** that manages to politicise social precariousness and preclude/contain the emergence of the far right

The agenda of change

“The citizens have noticed a change in the political agenda, in the way of doing things, with a much closer politics (...). We have put social issues above all other concerns. We have activated a neighbourhood plan for intervening in the most vulnerable areas with a budget of 150M€. We have tripled the public aids for renting. We have tripled the resources for employment plans. We have also increased the investment in housing fourfold. We have imposed fines of over 300.000€ to banks with empty dwellings. We have put forward the regulation of rents, which is not part of the powers of the City Council, but we have put it forward to other administrations. We have clearly changed the priorities of the city” (Ada Colau, Nació Digital, 10/04/2017)



Key themes

- Socio-spatial justice and the reconstruction of social rights
- Promotion of alternative forms of economy and citizen-centered development
- Sustainable habitability – recovery of public space, promotion of sustainable mobility
- Democratic radicalisation – neighbourhood politics, community management, social innovation support, and public-community coproduction
- Translocal, international city networks to share knowledge and experiences and to empower cities in the context of multilevel governance

Limits to change

- Lack of a solid majority
- Fierce opposition by a pro-establishment coalition (mass media and big political parties)
- Lack of powers in key policy areas
- Consequences of austerity measures
- Difficulty in building a new political hegemony
- Global nature of the city problems

The nature of the institution is not associated with the possibility of rupture. The institution is associated with governing what is possible and what actually exists - not the dreams nor the big landmarks. The institution, which has to manage the possible and the imperfect, is associated with inertias that tend to conservatism, not to rupture". (Ada Colau, Contexto, January 2017)

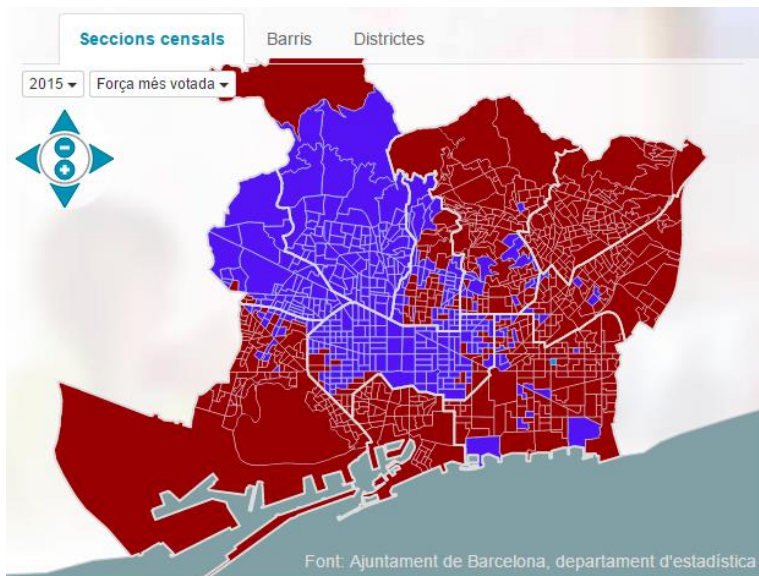
Opportunities for change

- Maximising key institutional resources at disposal of local governments
- Strong political leadership, feminized
- Confronting/putting pressure on upper tiers of government and international actors
- Building political alliances with urban social movements and coproducing public policies
- A multilevel struggle. Building a supralocal and internationalist municipalism

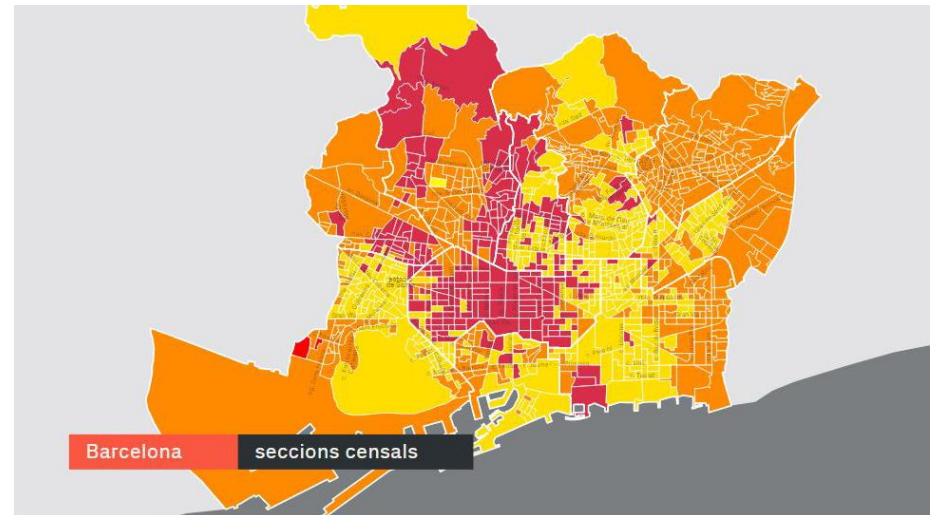
Future prospects / challenges

1. The fight for office and for ideological leadership in the city (radical municipalism vs Catalan nationalism). 2019 local elections as a crucial battle between the two

Local elections 2015



Catalan elections 2017



Future prospects / challenges

2. The metropolitanisation of the municipalist project: many of the urban problems that must be tackled at the municipal level operate at a metropolitan scale; many of the resources that allow to tackle these problems are found in metropolitan institutions and relationships



“... just as austerity is, by its very nature, a form of redistributive politics—in spatial, scalar and social terms—so must its progressive alternatives reach beyond the local, to the realms of the cross-scalar and the interurban (Peck, 2012: 651)

THANKS!

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