

Institutions mean inertia

Interview with Laia Forné, Barcelona en Comú¹

Barcelona en Comú has its origins in the social and political movements that emerged as a result of Spain's economic crisis and the protest movement known in Spain as the 15M movement. A citizen platform, Barcelona en Comú has been governing the City of Barcelona for almost two years after winning municipal elections by proposing a "democratic rebellion" and the "appropriation of the institutions". Laia Forné, Responsible for Active Democracy and Decentralisation in Barcelona, said in an article published by the Spanish journal *Diagonal* a few months after the elections that the municipality is formed not by the powers of a local government but by the social and communitarian powers that create a new institutionalism.

What challenges has the movement faced in becoming part of an institution? And in the specific case of Barcelona en Comú, what have you achieved, and what do you think the complex relationship between institutions and social movements should look like?

The main challenge Barcelona en Comú faces is to be a political organisation with the capacity to mobilise society together with other groups in order to exercise urban counterpower. This first year has been a year of getting to know the tasks of the institution. Coming to understand them, dealing with the challenges of the moment and adapting to the institution's times and structures. The challenge we face now is of an organisational nature: we need to strengthen the relations between the

1 | This interview took place in November 2016.

institution and the “suburbs” as much as possible. The institutions are designed in such a way that this kind of change is not easy to achieve. The institution means “inertia”, therefore this organisational challenge requires a critique of the institution and a review of the foundations on which it is based, for example what regulations have been formulated to determine the nature of its relationships with the external world?

If this inertia remains so powerful and the institution remains the same outwardly, it is difficult for those outside it to perceive the effort to rebuild its walls. Therefore asking for co-responsibility, asking for that task to be a shared responsibility sometimes seems like a poisoned proposal. That is normal. The only thing we can ask is that people trust in a long and difficult process that needs to give indications that it is on the right track, starting with concrete changes, progress and reforms. It is necessary to have a good understanding of the relevant institutional changes. In sum, what guarantees social rights is not the state, but the correlation of social forces. What guarantees the rights of the city is not the city council, but the urban counterpowers. Without organised social forces that demand and at the same time support measures, it is difficult to develop a new urban model.

To influence this dynamic reality we have institutional tools such as those we are creating at the Department of Participation. We have an idea, which we need to translate into concrete measures: participatory governance should not be based on ‘conflict management’ but rather on ‘conflict organisation’. The relationship between institutions and movements is conflictive, and this is how it is meant to be. Let us be clear: the institution wants to produce regulations and static norms, while social movements want to create leeway for a changing reality that is threatened by a financial logic that envelops everything.

If we have learned something outside the institutions, it is to build federated networks with strategies based on solidarity and mutual recognition that are focussed on short and medium-term plans. This is our cultural capital: the knowledge we produce through our political practices. Although it does not fit in with the institutional structures, it is our main asset for changing them.

Ada Colau has already announced her willingness to participate in a network of “shelter cities” as a way to welcome people who are trying to reach Europe and to disobey unjust laws imposed by nation states that go against the basic

rights of migrants. How does Barcelona express its “shelter city” status? Is the city planning joint actions of disobedience against refugee policies at the European level?

Out of the 160,000 refugees that the member states of the European Union pledged to take in in 2015, only 3,065 have been relocated from Greece and Italy to other countries. This figure is from July 2016, but the situation does not seem to have improved in the meantime. In the case of Spain, only 500 of the 17,000 people it promised to take in have been relocated. Cities and municipalities are taking in and integrating refugees, but in Spain they are not involved in formulating asylum policies, and nor do they receive funding to develop better policies. The state does not fund local integration policies, even though it receives European funds for this very purpose. For example, in the period between 2014 and 2020 the Spanish state will receive more than 330 million Euros, most of which, however, is being invested in border control measures.

In view of these figures, and together with other European cities Barcelona is showing the will to take in refugees directly through *Solidarity Cities*, a network of European cities formed to help manage the refugee crisis. In addition to assisting with the relocation of refugees this network also aims to support the exchange of information and knowledge about the situation of refugees. It aims to share the practices, challenges and solutions adopted by the cities that form part of the network. This European cities initiative is now trying to increase its visibility in order to push for the reallocation of EU funds all of which currently go to the central state rather than to local governments.

Barcelona is also promoting advocacy actions, putting pressure on administrations to fulfil their European commitments and to design policies that tackle the roots of the problem. In this context, the City Council is campaigning for the establishment of a humanitarian corridor to help refugees get to the European Union safely and prevent further deaths. Its cooperation with other municipalities is articulated in city to city relationships as well as within the framework of the various international networks of which the City Council forms part, such as Eurocities, MedCities, and United Cities and Local Governments.

The City of Barcelona has created a municipal project to care and provide social support for people who arrive here on their own via Greece and Turkey, northern Morocco, Ceuta and Melilla. This project, called the

Municipal Reception Programme, already offers around a hundred places for migrants. Its objective is to improve the processes of social inclusion and autonomy of these people and ensure that they are able to access the labour market and start a new life on their own once the programme ends.

It is also important to highlight the role that Barcelona's civil society is playing in this process, because this inclusion work is not just the result of public policies but also of the hospitality displayed by many residents and collectives that have already been doing this kind of work for some time now. So the objective is to create pressure at the European level and to design comprehensive solutions at the local level. The goal is not just to redefine Europe's relationship with its border policies, but also to rebuild the relationship between the cities – i.e. the main reception centres – and the EU. The cities need to be directly involved in finding political and social solutions.

As is the case in many other countries in Europe, one of the major problems in Spain has to do with the lack of transparency and corruption in the management of public buildings and urban spaces. Barcelona recognises the social value of the experiences occupied spaces provide, rather than simply the economic value of such properties. How does the government deal with occupied spaces? Do these spaces serve as a meeting point and strengthen the relationship between movements and institutions?

In the past the institutions conceived urban areas as a space in which they intervened in order to generate income without being subject to any democratic control mechanisms. If we drew up a map of the land ownership structures in Barcelona, it would probably show that a large number of financial institutions either own the land or decide how it is used. This limits the democratic instruments and sovereignty of those who live and work in Barcelona. Within this process of "commodification" – in which the state and the markets have acted together – processes of social self-defence have evolved that sought to regain basic rights and public spaces. Seen from this perspective, occupied spaces take on a different political meaning to that indicated by labels like "uncivil" or "illegal".

Barcelona has resources that are currently being used and managed by groups of citizens cooperating for non-commercial purposes. These social initiatives led by communities of active citizens aim to forge connections based not only on economic values, but on the values of communities that

continue to solve their problems collectively. The commons in the urban environment represent a challenge, as well as a change in the way public institutions operate.

During previous administrations Barcelona tried to find institutional answers to these social initiatives. Several citizens' groups are managing public resources. "Casales de Barrio" is a project run by an association according to a civic management model. In the "Pla de Buits" programme the City Council allows citizens' groups to use empty premises for diverse activities. And then there is the "Pla de Locales" programme in which municipal land that is not in use is given to citizens for them to develop their own initiatives. When we examined these programmes, we saw that the initiatives behind them always came directly from social movements and that, considering their origin, there are not that many of them. Both the regulations and the institutions' way of relating to collectives were part of an institutional reality that was not flexible enough to understand the meaning of "community", yet was tremendously innovative when it came to understanding what "private" means. However, we also realised that there is no global programme or common public policy that provides a framework for the community management of municipal resources.

What we understood is that we have not made the leap from the reality of the situation (i.e. the use of land and property by active and legitimate communities for social purposes on a district level) to the law (i.e. the creation of new rules and regulations that support or complement these community practices). Rather, the existing regulations have been used to manage, control and limit the power of these practices. This is why we supported a working group that aims to design a proposal for a conceptual and normative framework that defines how the institution should support these community practices, as well as defining the need for the integration of the institution into society and the criteria under which it should operate. This framework should lay the foundation for the creation of a new kind of relationship between the institution and the community through the recognition of community management and self-management practices that may in turn lead to the creation of a new policy of designating certain spaces as "Citizen Patrimony" in Barcelona. This explicit recognition requires that municipalities provide resources and public infrastructure for self-managed common use, according to the agenda of civil society.

You are a Member of the Department of Participation's Advisory Board. Collective management practices within the party itself, primary processes and open lists are measures that improve transparency both within the party and vis-à-vis the citizens. What mechanisms is Barcelona en Comú using to encourage citizens to participate in politics? And in what type of measures and policies do you encourage citizens to participate?

The challenge ahead is to develop participatory governments that can adapt to the forms of political interaction that already exist in a society. A new model of governance in Barcelona must respond to forms of participation other than those established within the institutional architecture. More and better democracy also means not falling into the trap of creating participation structures, which are devoid of content and have little real capacity for political action. The lesson learned in this political cycle is that not all of us need to participate in everything. It is more about creating means and mechanisms that enable us to have an impact on the problems and issues that interest us most, and on those with which we are most familiar.

We are immersed in a participatory process aimed at modifying the regulation of citizen participation. The objective is to give citizens more power and to create channels of democracy that foster the engagement of citizens. Right now, 80 percent of the time it is the City that promotes forums for participation, participatory processes, etc. We want that to change. We want the citizens to decide how and when they want to participate, we want them to feel sufficiently empowered to demand accountability or to participate in municipal policy-making when they want to.

At the moment, carrying out public consultations that are citizens-led is not easy. We are also thinking about creating autonomous bodies that validate the quality of the processes and evaluate the democratic mechanisms of the city and its participatory bodies. The city administration cannot be the only guarantor of democracy. Another priority is to reach the most invisible groups and those sections of the population that have no contact with the institutions (i.e. the majority of the population).

The fundamental question is how to reach out to young people and provide them with good-quality spaces, how to reach out to Latina women; how to reach citizens who work and have family responsibilities and no time to participate, and how to reach people who are simply unwilling to

engage. We want to encourage inclusive spaces that take inequality into account. A space of participation does not automatically become neutral merely by virtue of being participatory. The balance of power and the inequalities are translated into these spaces, and the City Council must develop measures of positive discrimination to give voice to those who do not have one.

There are collectives and economic elites with specific interests that have begun to realise that the spaces of participation are important for them, and that they need to be part of them if they want to influence public policy.

The election of Ada Colau brought hope to the discourse of governance based on the commons. Has Barcelona been able to inspire confidence among the citizens regarding the concept of “commons”?

I think there are two different dimensions in the interaction between the commons and the citizens as regards ongoing government actions. On the one hand there is a more communicative or rhetorical dimension, while on the other there is a more operational dimension, which is directly connected to specific programmes and policies.

With regard to the first dimension, I refer to how special emphasis is placed on the commons in speeches, in the way the message is constructed. I am not simply referring to the name of the political party, Barcelona en Comú, but to how the commons are introduced as a substantive part of the philosophy and model of the city for which we are campaigning. This is not a strategic approach but an integral part of the trajectory of those who have defined Barcelona en Comú’s sphere of action. We came together to solve collective problems through practices of reciprocity, interaction and decision-making generated in spaces of self-government and direct democracy. This has been our “political school”, so to speak, and has included learning about institutional relations and making very detailed analyses of how the public administration functions at its various levels.

As regards the second dimension, some of the programmes and policies are already making progress when it comes to talking about participation, but the goal is to translate the philosophy into concrete measures. Consider, for example, housing policies that seek to communalise the

public. There are many different ways of planning and implementing public programmes within that philosophy.

Our role is to see what kind of policies we can implement in each individual case, taking into account the redistributive role that a local government must play while at the same time transferring power to social initiatives that are organised and capable of ensuring that the commons are integrated into policies.