

Moment of confluence on the Atlantic coast

Interview with Claudia Delso, Marea Atlántica¹

A Coruña is a city on the Atlantic coast of North-West Spain. It is the second largest city in Galicia and famous for having the world's only Roman lighthouse still in use: the Tower of Hercules. Marea Atlántica (Atlantic Tide) is the grassroots movement that has been governing the city since May 2015. The movement uses the semantics of the sea to designate its decision-making phases. Marea Atlántica is one of the municipalist movements that are now sharing power in state institutions. Although each of these movements has its own specific characteristics, most have certain things in common: an ethical code, open primaries and programmes and infrastructural documents that were created through participatory processes. One of the main characteristics of the municipalist movements is that they are grassroots movements in which members of political parties participate individually, just like other participants. This is why these movements call themselves “confluency processes” (procesos de confluencia).

Marea Atlántica is an example of a grassroots movement that became a political party in order to run in municipal elections. It presented its candidacy for A Coruña's municipal elections in May 2015 and emerged as the strongest party with 30.97 percent of the vote, securing 10 seats on the city council. A Coruña is a port city with around 250,000 inhabitants. Do you think that the difficulties citizens' movements face in terms of maintaining their autonomy and identity once they become part of an institution are easier to handle in

1 | This interview took place in November 2016.

smaller cities? And in the case of Marea Atlántica, how is the relationship and communication between the original citizens' movement and the institution?

The city's size is a relevant factor and one should always bear in mind that it can have a negative or positive impact, depending on the situation. So even though A Coruña's small size favours a better relationship between the public institutions and the movement, it also weakens the movement since many of its key political groups cannot afford to participate as much as they did before they became part of an institution. Nonetheless I think the fact that A Coruña is a small city makes it really interesting for a political experiment like Marea Atlántica, because it means that people both inside and outside the movement are close to each other, and this facilitates a flux across the boundaries of the two poles: institution and movement. To answer the second question, the relationship between Marea Atlántica and the local government is a strong one, although there are always aspects that could be improved. Government officials participate in Marea Atlántica both as members of its working group (called the "Grupo Municipal") and as individual activists. That means that they participate in the dynamics of the movement just like any other person. In addition, the members of the Grupo Municipal share information and provide explanations on a regular basis at the general assembly, which takes place twice a month. Bearing this in mind, after a very intense period in which we went through four different elections at various administrative levels (local, regional and state elections) we need to focus on strengthening the movement.

A Coruña was declared a "Cidade Refuxio" (Shelter City) for refugees and criticised the policy of closing European borders, while at the same time demanding that the European Union, the member states and the regional government provide more support for migrants. What political measures for the integration of refugees is A Coruña implementing and to what extent could these measures be jointly implemented with other cities in Europe that declare themselves Shelter Cities for refugees? Would A Coruña be willing to form a network of collaboration with these cities?

Civil society demanded solidarity and a dignified solution to the refugee situation with what is called the "Shelter City" network even before the institutions with responsibilities in this area took action. A call for

solidarity by the City of Barcelona prompted many other cities and towns across the country to join this network. One of those cities is A Coruña. The network is channelling this demand from civil society, which once again is ahead of the institutions in wanting to join forces and resources to actively collaborate on measures for welcoming migrants.

This network of cities is already working at the European level, with concrete examples such as the collaboration between the City Council of Barcelona and the city councils of Lesbos and Lampedusa.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 14: “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” The city of A Coruña has provided a united response to the current refugee crisis, but making this a welcoming city goes beyond that. The City Council wants to design programmes and instruments that turn the city into a flagship welcoming city for immediate crisis situations and for the medium and long term. Our duty as an institution is to manage this wave of solidarity among the citizens so that the City Council agrees to accept an appropriate contingent of refugees, in coordination with the competent public authorities and with entities that have experience working in this area.

The City Council of A Coruña has designed medium and long-term initiatives to help these people and others who have applied for asylum and refugee status. And those who are already our neighbours, living in A Coruña, and have encountered barriers blocking their integration are also welcome to join in as full members of the city. These people must be made welcome and integrated because they have come here to escape poverty, war, femicide, sexual discrimination, and other forms of persecution.

Citizen participation transforms empty spaces in cities into places that create social capital for collective use. Last June the City Council of Naples, also a port city with 900,000 inhabitants, passed a resolution recognising seven public properties occupied by citizens and associations as “emerging and developing commons and civic environments”. All these buildings were public property that had been neglected for years. What happens with buildings that are used as squats in A Coruña? Have there been changes in the regulations governing public buildings and spaces since Marea Atlántica gained its political mandate?

At the moment there are no squats in the city, so there is no need to develop a specific policy on this issue. However, the squat movement has a long

tradition in A Coruña and buildings such as the “Casa das Atochas” and historical social centres like “C.S.A Atreu” and “Mil Luas” were occupied, and some of us were actively involved. So we see the steps taken in Naples as an example of an innovative policy on this issue. It is very interesting for us to observe Naples’ experiences with the official recognition of commons and the new experience of property that this has opened up. A few years ago a very exciting initiative called “Proyecto Cárcere” was launched in the city which aims to turn a prison owned by the State into a centre for cultural and social projects. We are trying to collaborate as much as possible with this project, and hopefully the building will be open to citizens before the end of the current legislative period.

In general terms, we are implementing several policies aimed at changing the way people use public buildings and spaces. For instance, we are trying to have all public buildings owned by the Council that are not currently in use opened up for projects to promote the participation of citizens in the decision-making process.

As the Councillor for Participation and Democratic Innovation (Concejala de Participación e Innovación Democrática) in a city of less than 300,000 inhabitants and coming back to the question mentioned above, is it easier to promote and manage processes of citizen participation in smaller cities? Despite all the theory, there is not much of a culture of processes of direct citizen participation, either online or on a face-to-face basis. What kind of citizen do you think it is easier to motivate to take part in participatory processes? And in what kind of political processes and decisions should the citizens be involved?

The size of this city allows us to design participation policies based on methodologies that are more direct and physical in comparison with those used in bigger cities. Our first initiative aimed at organising the city into districts is a good example. The characteristics of individuals who decide to get involved vary depending on the specific objective of a particular participatory process. For example, during this process of organising the city into districts, most of the participants were older citizens, whereas on the issue of the participatory budget most of the participants were aged between 30 and 40. In addition we have had several participation processes specifically aimed at the city’s youth. We regard participation as a basic civil right to which every citizen is entitled. For that reason we must create the conditions for those willing to exercise that right to do so

and at the same time we must raise local awareness of the importance of participating in public decision-making processes. Once such a context has been created, citizens will be able to determine for themselves those areas in which public participation is more relevant.

How do the citizens view the development of political measures that revolve around the concept of the commons? Do they demand comprehensive protection of these assets, even though it entails an increase in government spending?

We truly believe that the policies that we are implementing are contributing to the redefinition of the concept of “common good”², particularly at a practical level. Even though citizens tend to regard common good policies simply as an instrument for protecting and expanding the public sector, we should make an effort to introduce a less limited concept of the common good, together with more innovative proposals in this area

2 | The definition of the common good has been expanded in recent years thanks, among others, to Toni Negri. So far the definition of common good has been challenged mainly theoretically. In this respect the “new municipalism” (nuevo municipalismo) can help to ensure that the theoretical redefinition of the concept is put into practice.