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New Municipalism in South America?

Developing theory from experiences in Argentina and Chile

Abstract

Working towards social transformation through forms of participatory and economic democracy are core elements of the new municipalist agenda (Thompson, 2021). While utilising a “politics of proximity” to develop citizen-led collectives in various forms and scales (Russell, 2019), these projects reimagine and reclaim the local state for social and ecological justice. However, much of the empirical literature that has fed into the development of this conceptualisation of new municipalism, while having a global ambition, has been based on European experiences. Thus, there are key questions around its applicability to other places, particularly in the Global South. South America has generated some of the emblematic cases of struggles against neoliberalism through reclaiming public services, from important interventions in reversing privatisations in the region (Cumbers, 2012) to influential municipalist innovations, including participatory public policies such as participatory budgeting (Goldfrank and Schrank, 2009). This paper seeks to critically interrogate new municipalism through an engagement with key social and political changes, state-civil society dynamics and political concepts in South America, illustrated with examples from municipal grassroots initiatives in Argentina and Chile. It argues that municipalism can be more extensively theorised by, first, engaging with a broader temporality than just moments of crisis; second, being attentive to the longer history of diverse participatory municipal initiatives in the region; and finally, incorporating the concept of territory (*territorio* in Spanish), which has emerged as a key dimension for understanding social transformations in the region.

Keywords

New municipalism, South America, social movements, post-neoliberalism, territory

Introduction

The emergence of “new municipalism” (hereafter NM) as a phenomenon and concept is making an important contribution to current debates on progressive urban movements emerging out of neoliberal crises in Europe and beyond. Key features of this nascent conceptualisation of city-based politics

include strategising for the transformation of the social relations through forms of participatory and economic democracy at the local scale (Thompson, 2021). While utilising a “politics of proximity”, these projects reimagine and reclaim the state for projects of ecological, social and economic justice (Russell, 2019). The catalyst for the new municipalist movement is identified as the 2007-9 global financial crisis, the related Eurozone crisis and the subsequent shift towards austerity policies in much of Europe and North America. A wave of mobilisations against neoliberal-inspired austerity policies was characterised by a shift in the locus for political action from the national to the local level. This brought into sharper focus the generative political possibilities of the everyday and the local; that is, the municipal scale as a rich seam for generating prefigurative politics (Russell, 2019).

Foundational literature on NM developed from important cases in Europe, notably Barcelona and Madrid, and much of its rubric embodies features of these. The associated 2017 ‘Fearless Cities’ gathering drew more than 700 participants from 180 cities and 40 countries (Barcelona en Comú et al, 2019), including representatives from Rosario in Argentina, Valparaíso in Chile and Montevideo in Uruguay. The event facilitated important transnational dialogues between participants and movements, and had a coalescing effect on underpinning principles and strategies of the movement. The following year saw a ‘Fearless Cities’ Latin America gathering in Valparaíso, which was co-organised by the movement-party *Ciudad Futura* (Rosario). During October 2022, a Fearless Cities meeting was held in the city of Rosario itself. The growing internationalism of the new municipalist movement is a significant trend, but in terms of the theoretical basis of NM, this increasing engagement with South American cities and contexts demands a closer analysis of whether the key features and assumptions of the concept travel well and what, indeed, progressive urban politics in South American cities looks like.

A critical prerogative in recent urban debates has been the desire to decolonialise urban theory (Robinson, 2015; Lawhon and Truelove, 2019; Rodriguez-Mancilla, 2017; Farrés and Matarán, 2014) to overcome the tendency to apply western-centric theory to the global south that is desensitised to local contexts, while neglecting the potential to build broader theory from diverse

standpoints that is “attentive to issues of contextual, positional and situational specificity, resisting the temptation to read off global trends from particular circumstances.” (Peck, 2017: 10). In this regard, there is a danger that arguments about NM, which emerge out of particular spatial contexts in Europe, are applied too readily elsewhere without appropriate scrutiny.

With that in mind, our aim in this paper is to engage constructively but critically with NM through a South American lens. Our contribution centres around three key arguments. First, that, temporally, the framing of NM around the 2007-9 financial crisis as a catalyst reflects a North Atlantic sensibility in relation to broader neoliberal governance tendencies that transfers less well to other spatial contexts. Second, that new municipalist theory needs to account for a longer history of municipal-level participatory politics in the region. Third, that the concept of territory (*territorio* in Spanish) must be incorporated into understandings of contemporary urban politics in South America. We illustrate our arguments here through drawing upon examples from ongoing research into municipalist processes in Argentina and Chile. Specifically, we discuss the cases of Recoleta, Chile, and Rosario, Argentina, based on interviews with representatives of five social organisations carried out in 2020 and 2021, as well as analysis of existing literature. Recoleta and Rosario are relevant to the analysis in several ways. Both these cases have features associated with NM, both have distinctive political histories in the context of neoliberalism, and both have contexts in which territory has been an important component of political action. These features are clarified in the sections that follow. At the same time, we recognise that this does not constitute an extensive appraisal of NM in the region. Nevertheless, we believe that the insights from the two cases are sufficient to argue that there is something distinctive about the form of municipalist politics in South America.

The rest of the paper is divided into four parts. In the next section, we sketch out the key themes of NM pertinent to our arguments, before identifying some of the critical issues faced in applying it to urban politics beyond the Global North and its origins in Western Europe in particular. This leads us to outline key aspects of a municipalist trajectory in South America, which includes identifying common global properties in relation to neoliberalism, crisis and democratic mobilisation

but also critical divergences reflecting temporal and socio-spatial particularities. In the third section, we sketch out key elements of South American municipalism drawing upon evidence from Argentina and Chile, and the municipalities of Rosario and Recoleta, emphasising the three critical arguments outlined above before moving on to conclude.

New Municipalism as a democratic response to neoliberalism's crisis tendencies

NM has been described as a 'nascent' social movement (Russell 2019; Thompson 2021) which represents a "radical-democratic and transformative response to urban-capitalist crises" (Thompson 2021: 319). NM is juxtaposed to a newer and deeper phase of austerity neoliberalism, reimposed across the world in response to the financial crisis: "a new generation of structural adjustment programs" which assaulted public services and budgets, social movements and labour unions (Peck and Theodore, 2019: 249).

NM is identified as an emergent of a set of mobilisations in the wake of the 2007-9 financial crisis, the related Eurozone sovereign debt crisis and the period of neoliberal-inspired austerity that followed these events (Davies and Blanco, 2017). It was initially associated with anti-austerity social movements that emerged in Spain at the municipal level (Aguiló Bonet and Sabariego, 2016; Blanco et al., 2020; Featherstone et al., 2020; García Agustín, 2020; Janoschka and Mota, 2021). Critically, the local scale and municipal state –the scale of everyday life, where austerity cuts to basic services are often most deeply experienced– is seen as a key strategic site of contestation of these neoliberal processes.

Based on the aftermath of the Spanish 2011-2012 series of protests that led to the 15-M movement, different studies have considered the critical engagement with state institutions as a defining attribute of NM. This is described as a transition "from the social sphere to the political arena" that can "generate new relational logics between the institutional and the social" (Gomà, 2018: 21-

22). The movement campaigned, first, for nominating candidates of their own to local elections, and selecting these candidates and designing electoral platforms through participatory and direct decision-making methods (Aguiló Bonet and Sabariego, 2016; Calle Collado 2016; Blanco, Salazar and Bianchi, 2020). Once elected, municipalists sought to take participatory democracy as a working principle for state institutions. For instance, in Barcelona, including workers and users on the governing board of the municipal energy company (although this project was later frustrated) (Angel, 2021), or using digital technologies for promoting citizen engagement in public affairs (Thompson, 2021).

Subsequently, a transnational NM movement has been depicted as not only arising from particular resistances to neoliberal driven austerity but also crystallising into wider demands for a more radical democratic municipal politics. Common features of these otherwise quite disparate movements and contexts are: a “politics of proximity” where political subjectivities are created through the local coming together around struggles for the urban commons; a focus on the possibilities of transformation of municipal state institutions towards democratic self-governance; and moving beyond hierarchical, masculinist forms to create decentred structures of power from the bottom up (Russell 2019). Underpinning this is the sense that the NM movement transcends a more localist politics by espousing alternative social values that can challenge both neoliberal governance and capitalist social dynamics.

The literature uses the term “dual power” (Thompson, 2021) to characterise this flexible strategy of building power “outside” of the state while also engaging with electoral politics “inside” of municipal institutions (Angel, 2021). In this way, they endorse the expansion of grassroots mobilisations, popular assemblies and other forms of local activism, while taking the “ethos of these social movements” and applying them to “the governance of their city” (Russell, 2019: 992).

This discussion engages with the long-standing debate regarding the extent to which social movements should attempt to engage with the state, and if this strategy means their

institutionalisation, co-optation or exhaustion. Though NM interpretations of the role of the state do not refuse it altogether as a place for disputation, there are some differences with regards to the importance they give to it. It has been argued that NM does not aim to conquer the state as it is, nor reject it completely, but to create new political institutions “against” the existing state-based or self-governing local communities (Durand Folco, 2017), or that there are local movements that opt for state-oriented demands to bring about a “struggle in the state” (Angel, 2017).

Locating (New) Municipalism in South America

Going beyond these debates, our central concern here is with the trans-local agenda for NM to critically engage with and transform the organisations and institutions of the municipal state into more democratic and participatory spaces of citizen self-governance (Russell, 2019). However, in interpreting the significance of NM, it is critical that we appreciate its variegated nature. In Spain, for example, a housing crisis and mass evictions in the wake of the financial crisis was a critical ‘local’ trigger for the movement (Janoschka and Mota, 2021). Thus, it is important to retain a sense of the diverse terrains in which such struggles take place (Thompson, 2021). Indeed, if we understand radical municipalism as a response to neoliberal crisis, it is important to accept that neoliberalisation processes themselves have a variegated character, acquiring different forms in specific temporal conjunctures and spatial contexts (Peck, Brenner and Theodore, 2018).

On this basis, we subscribe to the suggestion of Connell and Dados (2014) of moving towards a more comprehensive examination of Global South cases when considering neoliberalism and resistances to it. Generally, Western Europe and North America have been seen as “the heartlands of neoliberal discursive production” (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 380), while Latin America’s forms of neoliberalism are thought of as been “imposed from outside” (Jessop, 2018: 349). Instead, Connell and Dados consider the “agency of Southern actors” (2014: 134) in promoting the unfolding of neoliberalism. In other words, Southern geographies are also “sites in the production of global

processes” and not just “passive recipients of them” (Hart, 2020: 241). This is especially important for urban studies, considering the challenge pointed by Roy (2014) of understanding “new geographies of theory”, which means “not simply to study the cities of the global South as interesting, anomalous, different, and esoteric empirical cases, but rather to recalibrate urban theory itself” (ibid: 15). Thus, our theories must recognise contexts, local conditions and distinctive hybrids, without forgetting interconnections across different sites of divergence and discrepancy, and interdependency to the wider context (Peck et al., 2018; Lawhon and Truelove, 2019).

This is particularly pertinent to interpreting municipalism in South America. Recognising its presence requires locating it within the conjunctural conditions of neoliberal crisis and resistance on the continent. To begin with, as Geddes (2014) has described, there is a significant difference in temporality between the crisis of neoliberalism in Europe and that in Latin America. Neoliberal crises and pushback took place in many countries in Latin America from the end of the 1980s to the early 2000s, beginning with protests in Venezuela and Argentina. Addressing the more radical anti-neoliberal responses by movements in Bolivia, Mexico and Brazil during this period and beyond, Geddes argued: “‘Northern’ theorisations of local governance will need to be widened considerably to take account of important developments in parts of Latin America” (2014: 3150). This included local initiatives, predating the NM emergence in Europe, that were critical of existing state institutions and in some cases sought to reconstitute the local state, notably experiments in participatory budgeting that originated from Brazilian cities and the paradigmatic case of Porto Alegre from the late 1980s (Wampler and Avritzer, 2004).

It is important to note some other significant temporal and spatial particularities from South American political economy, chiefly the way in which the processes of authoritarianism, neoliberalism and democratisation are deeply intertwined. The period of authoritarianism and subsequent return to democracy in South American countries during the 1970s to 1990s, which have divergent temporalities within the continent, dovetailed with the unfurling of Washington Consensus-driven neoliberalism in the region -though Chile’s initial neoliberal reforms pre-date the Washington

Consensus and make it something of a precursor to wider global shifts (Reyes, 2009). The implementation of economic liberalisation alongside early processes of re-democratisation marked out neoliberalism as a distinctive social project, compared to elsewhere. In particular, the damaging effect of the technocratisation of policymaking and the related distancing of civil society from the state (Silva, 2009). Latin American municipalist theorists consider the 1980s as a turning point for municipal politics in the region. A series of factors converged during the decade: rapid urbanisation; the return to democratic rule after decades of dictator regimes, including local authorities; and the implantation of neoliberal policies including state reform, privatisations of key areas of the economy, and adjustment programmes (Carrión, 2019). The relative contraction of the functions of the national state led to an administrative decentralisation and municipalities were tasked with the local implementation of policies designed at the national or provincial level, as well as having to deal with an expanded agenda. However, as Cravacuore (2009) notes for Argentina and Montecinos (2005) in the Chilean case, not every municipality had enough state capacities, resources or competences to do so effectively, apart from the lack of autonomy, causing saturation and growing social demands. In addition, the emphasis on pro-market policies led to a paradox: municipalities becoming relatively more relevant, while having less influence on market regulation (Carrión, 2019).

Carrión (2019) identifies different waves of municipalism in the region since the beginning of the 1990s. The first municipalist wave - up until the early 2000s - saw municipalities gaining in significance, with an emphasis on new participatory and proximity politics for civil society. In some cases, involvement in this wave as city mayors helped parties and leaders to catapult themselves decades later with candidacies to provincial or national governments (Baiocchi & Gies, 2019; Carrión, 2019), connected with the later rise of the so-called post-neoliberal governments (Carrión, 2019). On this basis, neoliberal crises, political waves and pushback at the local level took place in South America within differences in temporalities, features and motivations compared to processes in the Global North. These differences can also be found within and between countries in South America as we demonstrate more fully in the next section.

Variegated temporalities, transformative approaches to the local state and territorial municipalism in Argentina and Chile

Variegated temporalities of crisis and resistance

Building on Geddes' (2014) argument and expanding the notion of temporality further, we suggest that the period of authoritarianism, the nature of democratisation and the particular social dimensions in which neoliberalism took root in South America continue to underpin the form of progressive urban politics and activism at the local level. This can be illustrated more fully with reference to Argentina and Chile which are differentially positioned in relation to neoliberal encroachment; key moments of crisis and resistance; the nature of the relations between social movement mobilisation and the municipal state; and the importance of a territorial understanding of social and democratic agency.

In Argentina, neoliberal reforms can be traced back to the military regime (1976-1983) but the transition to democracy did not reverse the path. In the context of a hyperinflation crisis, Carlos Menem's government (1989-1999) launched a massive neoliberal structural adjustment program supported by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and other financial institutions and investors. This new programme had the negative effects of unemployment, increased job informality, regressive income distribution and marginalisation of poorer groups (Azpiazu et.al, 1998; Cooney, 2007). In Chile, radical and comprehensive neoliberal reforms were carried out as a fundamental component of Augusto Pinochet's authoritarian regime (1973-1990) and would later be codified in the 1980 constitution, known as "Pinochet's constitution" (Silva, 2009; Reyes, 2012). The associated "technocratisation" of decision-making over social and political issues during this era was strongly associated with the period of depoliticisation of civil society that endured well into the return to democracy (Olavarría, 2003; Garreton, 2003). The constitution is now undergoing a process of profound change.

Particularly towards the end of the last century, new social movements emerged globally to reject neoliberal globalisation and privatisation of public and communal resources and spaces, with South America emerging as a leading arena for resisting and constructing these alternatives. In the 1980s and again in the late 1990s Argentina saw protests emerge in different cities. A first wave of urban protests emerged in response to rising prices in public services and council taxes, a housing crisis and hyperinflation that brought about a rise in staple food prices (González Bombal, 1988; Cuenya et al. 1990). A second wave towards the end of the 1990s built up to the major social, political and economic crisis of 2001 against neoliberalism in the country and the consequences of the structural adjustment program. Novel forms of collective resistance to neoliberal politics rose from the neighbourhoods all over the country, which also organised and promoted community participation to provide vital resources for the unemployed (Merklen, 2005; Svampa and Pereyra, 2003). The growth of social mobilisation during these years led to the development of a lasting, extensive, and diverse network of neighbourhood-based and popular activist groups. These territorial movements have become key actors for the country's politics, due to their ability to represent people that are excluded from the formal economy and for their advocacy of social rights (Fernández-Alvarez, 2020).

On the other hand, anti-neoliberal dissent developed more slowly in Chile. The inhibition of collective identity and action was an overt aim of the neoliberal programme introduced by Pinochet (Taylor, 2006) and the depoliticising effects of this continued into the period of democratisation (Garretón, 2003). In this context, few anticipated the first wave of student protests in 2006, in which students across Chile went on strike or marched to call for free travel passes and an end to fees associated with university study. By the second wave of student protests in 2011, student leaders had reframed their earlier specific demands as a broader protest against a neoliberal education system and took specific aim at the need for a new constitution to undo the reforms codified in the 1980 constitution (Donoso, 2013). Almost a decade later, following growing if cyclical waves of protest that increasingly gained support from broad sectors of society, a referendum on constitutional change in 2020 returned a landslide vote for a new constitution.

Thus, subsequent to the crisis in Argentina and accompanying the truncated dissent in Chile, what has emerged is not a decisive shift towards an explicitly municipal politics or the maintenance of local campaigns, but instead a broader refocusing on the possibilities of the state and its adaptation to sustained dissent from sectors in civil society. In the 2000s, with the emergence of a wave of 'post-neoliberal' governments in South America that (to various extents) sought to forge a new social pact based on the idea of the 'return of the state' in social protection and development (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2012), some of these social movements considered engaging with and even reclaiming institutional structures as vehicles for their transformative projects. This included Argentina, with movements pursuing their claims through their presence within state institutions but also continuing mobilisations (Longa, 2019), a process that had echoes elsewhere in the region under the banner of the "left-turn" in Latin American politics, with the exception of Chile (Silva, 2009), which is now experiencing a "late left-turn" with the election of Gabriel Boric in 2021.

Municipalism, state and social movements: transforming existing institutions through participation

A key dimension of NM movements relates to their aspirations to democratise state institutions and have them "opened outwards" (Russell, 2019: 1003) to allow for increasing levels of social involvement in deciding and implementing local policies. These include a wide variety of initiatives, from local forums, participatory budgeting and open-source digital platforms to host citizen assemblies (Durand Folco, 2016; Janoschka and Mota, 2021; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). However, this development of participatory politics at the local scale has a longer history in South America.

For at least three decades, government policies at the local level have demonstrated a phenomenon which could be defined as participatory municipalism, a distinct urban policy regime "designed to expand and improve municipal services, engage in redistributive spending, increase taxes, facilitate popular participation and generally strengthen the role of the local state" (Goldfrank and Schrank, 2009: 451-452). Debates and experiences on how to democratise the city government, open-up the municipal state to social movements, and engage the population within the local

government, flourished in the region. Until that moment, Baiocchi and Gies observe that “around the world, those looking for municipal alternatives turned to “Red Bologna” in the 1970s and United Kingdom municipal socialism in the 1980s. But for the next two decades, Latin American experiences dominated the scene” (2019: 313). Arguably, lessons from these experiences need to be taken into account for current NM discussions. In a way acutely identified by Dagnino (2007), these experiences later faced a discursive crisis which is the result of a “perverse confluence” between neo-liberal and democratic participatory projects. Also, the latter resurgence of a conservative wave of governments saw the loss of the initial progressive appeal of participatory innovations and the reappropriation of participatory discourses from right-wing sectors, which are incorporated into “technocratic models of governance” (Baiocchi & Gies, 2019: 314).

In Argentina, Rosario has been one of the focal points of the cycle of protests and social mobilisation that signalled the crisis of neoliberal policies in 2001, in a city severely affected by high unemployment and poverty rates (Carranza, 2018), with popular and neighbourhood assemblies claiming for democratising decision-making processes and questioning the existing form of representative democracy. Rosario became a city characterised by its wide and consolidated network of urban socio-political associations and organisations working on the territories. In response to this growing dissatisfaction with institutional politics and pressing economic needs, different policies emerged to foster urban participation on the neighbourhoods, such as the participatory budgeting and the urban agriculture programme (Bloj, 2008; Lattuca 2011).

Since 2011, the district of Recoleta in Santiago, Chile, has shown that it is possible to reclaim public services and even create new forms of public organisation at the local level, with Communist Party mayor Daniel Jadue playing a significant role in this process. These forms of ownership range from the creation of a new public service managed by the local government (popular pharmacies), to partnerships between local authorities and other public institutions (Open University of Recoleta), to a workers' cooperative taking over the concession from a profit-driven company (cleaning service). A

manager of a cooperative in Recoleta draws attention to the possibility for a politics of proximity through municipal initiatives.

“The community requires empowerment... but for the community to be empowered, it has to know that the economic system in which it lives today takes advantage of it ... people should start to get to know their environment better, see how they mobilise, see the changes that exist... that they can access [medicines] at fair prices... people realise that their remedies are not worth what you pay in the private pharmacy, that the glasses they buy should be much cheaper... but the current market forces you to get into the system of consumerism. I believe that there are certain lessons [that] the Recoleta Municipality is creating.” (Interview with manager of co-operative ‘Jatu Newen’, 2021)

Thus, despite the current legal and institutional limitations of implementing anti-neoliberal policies at the local level, the concrete initiatives from radical municipalities nevertheless highlight the limitations of Chile’s political system and call for change in the current order to achieve social and environmental justice. A representative from MODATIMA, a social movement with a focus on deprivatising water services, articulated the emergence of municipal alternatives in terms of the exclusion of popular resistance to neoliberalism at the state level:

“I believe that there is a contradiction that occurs in Chile, in that policies are very centralised, but organised expressions, especially mobilisation, have been very decentralised or territorial. There is no project that unites all the resistances that are occurring in Chile... rather today it seems more viable to resist in a territory or in a commune...” (Interview with representative from MODATIMA, 2021)

These limitations due to the legal framework have also been recognised by social movements for education, environment and radical unions that have demanded a constitutional change to unlock neoliberal principles. A considerable number of these groups were victorious in the elections of May 16 of 2021 to be part of the convention that will write the new constitution.

Among representatives of municipal initiatives in Rosario, and similar to the situation in Chile and Recoleta, the persistent centrality of the national state articulated in post-neoliberal scholarship is coupled with scepticism of the transformative possibilities of the municipal. Two interviewees emphasised the continued legacy of centralisation from the dictatorship and related class struggles taking precedence over any notion of commitment to municipal politics. As a representative from La Creciente, a horizontally-organised housing cooperative, described:

“I understand municipalism as the capacities in local spheres to generate changes, despite national and provincial guidelines. Taking advantage of the proximity with the population, they promote spaces for participation and tend to promote projects or public policies, which go beyond the traditional scope of the functions of the municipalities. Local governments, in close relationship with citizens, can generate more comprehensive policies, give rise to self-management processes and recover the idea of common goods, seeking different forms of public management. ... On the negative side, I could say that they do not have sufficient resources for radical transformations and massive hegemonies.” (Interview with representative from La Creciente, 2020)

On this account, municipal alternatives are understood as experimental and progressive, but inherently limited in their ability to effect wide-ranging political change. In this instance, this is due to available resources; a factor also observed in the literature for the Barcelona and Madrid cases by Blanco et.al (2020) and Janoschka and Mota (2021), who consider that the municipal state's lack of resources and legal constraints pose limitations to address much of the problems concentrated in cities. This idea also chimes with Russell's (2019) argument in favour of avoiding the 'local trap': the local scale could be a starting point, but movements need to acknowledge the possibility of, and indeed the requirement for, a multi-scalar politics that transcends these limitations. In this respect, other interviewees describe the national state as the inevitable end point or even focus of strategic action. A representative from La Toma in Rosario, a former supermarket occupied by its workers and now headquarters to almost 50 popular, trade union and human rights organisations, explained:

“I am not in the least convinced by the possibility of municipalities – islands that are not intimately linked to the process of world class struggle. That does not mean that minimum concrete demands are not proposed or articulated... but that demand inevitably raises us to a ‘non-local’ response” (Interview with representative from La Toma, 2020).

Thus, if the municipal state is not the sole focus of action for movements both in Argentina and in Chile, engaging with - while trying to transform and democratise - the local state only cannot be considered as a defining feature of municipalism for South America. Rather, in order to define municipalism we suggest it is necessary to focus on territorial politics and territory as a critical concept for mobilisation.

Towards a renewed notion: territorial municipalism

We argue that a key concept for developing theorisation and understanding municipalist dynamics for politics in South America is the idea of territory. In the last two decades, the region has experienced a growing emergence of conflicts where the notion of territory features as a central issue in dispute. Since neoliberal reforms, the logic of dispossession of territories has been intensified through the privatisation of public assets and services, the logic of neoextractivism through large-scale exportation of raw materials, the expulsion and displacement of communities and socio-environmental damage (Svampa, 2015). Conflicts include indigenous people, peasants and afro-descendants and entire towns mobilising against extractivism; feminist movements in defense of the body-territory (*cuerpo-territorio* as Zaragocin and Caretta (2021) point out), and inhabitants of urban peripheries struggling for dignity and their right to the city.

The way in which these movements focus on territory has had the effect of broadening the scope, definition and application of the concept. Traditionally, disciplines such as political science and geography have understood the notion of territory as the “natural base of the nation-state” (Haesbaert,

2011; Elden, 2013). This classical, legal-administrative vision is linked to the centralisation of power at the national level, with central authorities organising the space and promoting the cultural construction of one nation. However, the appropriation of the word by different social movements has expanded the limits of the discussion and made territory a key component of their political-epistemic claims (Porto-Gonçalves, 2002; Halvorsen, 2019).

The importance of territory is that it constitutes a conceptual lifeline for various subaltern classes and groups. The notion allows the articulation of a more complete, complex overview of their world and its demands. From different geographies, territory demands recognition that it is not *just* land for indigenous people and peasants; it is not *just* body for feminist movements; it is not *just* housing for the inhabitants of popular settlements, and it is not *just* environment for community assemblies against extractivism. Rather, territory is an integrating space that enables the material and symbolic reproduction of life. An important characteristic of this is the demand for the recognition of the multiple territorialities that are present in a determined modern-state (Haesbaert, 2011; Porto - Gonçalves, 2002).

Thus, territory has emerged as a key cleavage for understanding political dynamics and social mobilisation (Rossi, 2018), particularly how state and society relations have been transformed during the expanded temporality that we address in this paper. This does not mean that political dynamics became denationalised. Instead, we argue that in understanding how municipalism works in South America, it is key to identify spatial cleavages and grassroots actors involved in political disputes. These social movements act and unfold their strategy on the basis of the territory where they are localised, but with the aim of transcending their influence and having an impact beyond the local scale, and beyond the municipal state, as we saw in the previous section. The way in which this has been manifested in Recoleta, Chile, and Rosario, Argentina, is now discussed in turn.

In Chile, the importance of territory can be traced back to the mobilisation of the Mapuche people after the Pinochet dictatorship. Although the Mapuche struggle dates back to the beginning of

colonisation, it is since the mid-1990s that "territory" emerged as a concept to support the opposition to projects for forestry extractivism, calling for land occupation and the associated autonomy (Melin et al., 2019). With the 2000s-2010s wave of mobilisations, organising at the local level began to adopt a territorial approach. These included movements against different types of extractivism (including mining, hydroelectric energy, and agro-industry businesses); for the defence of socio-natural commons such as water, land, seeds, etc. (Melin et al., 2019; Panez et al., 2017); movements for housing and the right to the city; and the student movement and the struggle for a free and not-for-profit education based on territorial particularities.

The importance of territory in these mobilisations has increased since the anti-neoliberal rebellion of October 2019. An example of this is the emergence of the so-called *territorial assemblies* on a neighbourhood level, occupying public spaces to discuss popular demands, denouncing human rights violations made by the Chilean government, and debating the ongoing constituent process. In addition, many of these assemblies have been dedicated to facing the precariousness of daily life, making community meals (*ollas comunes*), childcare activities, solidarity for impoverished neighbours, among other initiatives (Rodríguez-Mancilla et al., 2020), which have some similarities with the popular and neighbourhood assemblies and movements that grew in Argentina particularly in the midst of the 2001 crisis, presented earlier in the paper.

In the face of neoliberal dispossession, movements against different types of extractivism have sought to strengthen community organisation around the approach of the commons in territorial struggles (Roose and Panez, 2020). The commons can be defined as a space of protection in daily life that emerges from communities reclaiming and democratically managing common public services and resources. However, some of these projects have encountered difficulties in engaging and establishing strategic links with the state in the direction that Cumbers (2015) describes to promote commons politics, choosing, instead, an autonomist strategy.

In this sense, the Recoleta experience has articulated a vision of the commons between processes of community organisation and institutional action. One of the initiatives there that clearly engages with the idea of a territorial form of municipalism present in South America is the initiative of the 'People's Real Estate Agency' (*Inmobiliaria Popular*) for the inhabitants of the peripheries. The municipal state rents newly-built apartments to the commune's poorest families through a 'fair price' scheme, by charging an amount that is less than 25 per cent of the household's income. These apartments have been built through funds from the central Ministry of Housing and Urbanism (Panez Pinto, 2020). In contrast to national neoliberal housing policy in the rest of Chile, 'People's Real Estate Agency' land and housing will remain in public ownership (at the municipal level), in order to avoid real estate speculation, contribute to overcoming urban inequalities, and improve access to urban services and goods. This is carried out in coordination with neighbourhood organisations. These organisations build their coordination with the municipality based on a claim that goes "beyond housing" as a social problem, conceiving territory as a larger category that includes demands such as the right to the city, recognition of grassroots organisation and improvement of public space in neighbourhoods. However, the district has faced limitations in balancing both areas of "dual power", due to the reproduction of institutional practices rooted in a traditional political structure, a problem also observed in other NM cases (Angel, 2017; Blanco et.al, 2020; Janoschka and Mota, 2021). In Recoleta, this is also rooted in the reproduction of power asymmetries between the local state and social organisations, which has led to an emphasis on more state-led initiatives with only partial alliances with organisations.

In Argentina, Merklen's seminal work (2005) on popular classes describes how territory has become critical in defining collective identity and forms of politicisation since the 1980s and 1990s. This involves, for example, land occupations (Cuenya et.al, 1990; Brent, 2015), advocating for better public service provision at the local level (González Bombal, 1988), and socio-environmental movements organising against extractivist projects (Christel and Torunczyk, 2017).

In this context, the notion of territory is linked to the importance of neighbourhoods located in city peripheries and towns for social mobilisation and collective action against the consequences of neoliberal policies. This has led to the creation of new social movements that seek to “politicise territories” and “territorialise politics” at the same time (Vommaro, 2017). The organisation of these grassroots movements has been influenced by the interactions they have established with public policies and the state at various levels. They develop relations with state institutions and public officers, with varying degrees of collaboration or contention. For example, by directly participating in the management of social programmes, or promoting new legislation.

In the case of Rosario, initiatives launched by movement-party *Ciudad Futura* clearly evoke a territorial municipalism. Its history as a social movement dates back to 2005 in the neighbourhood of Nuevo Alberdi, located in the urban periphery. This popular neighbourhood was the epicentre of a land dispute between private real estate investors planning to build gated elite communities and the original inhabitants facing the threat of eviction. The movement resisted land dispossession and supported a cooperative dairy farm and factory managed by their workers and activists (Arpini, Stegemann and Brown, 2021). Thanks to such social movements’ advocacy and support, in 2018, a national law on socio-urban integration (nº 27.453) subjected popular neighbourhoods to be declared of public interest, thus allowing them to remain for the communities rather than real estate development (Monteverde et.al, 2021). In the case of Nuevo Alberdi, this resulted in the movement engaging in the urban planning process with the state at different levels to co-build housing for local people. It is the defence of particular neighbourhoods as part of broader territorial imaginaries and struggles that is key here to movement building. Municipal activism is therefore firmly bound up with concrete, specific spaces where a movement emerges and elaborates forms of identification linked to particular territories to defend a place for imagining and prefiguring the city. In turn, the concept of territory allows an understanding of municipalism beyond municipal state-centric definitions and by recognising the meanings and strategies of the movements themselves, without denying the continuing importance of engaging with the state through a multi-scalar politics.

Conclusion

NM is a phenomenon discussed in global terms and illustrated with case studies from around the world; however, it is theoretically under-researched in terms of how its core assumptions and features “travel” to contexts other than the Northern European cities upon which it was first observed. This paper initiates this process by testing some of these against key social and political events and processes in Chile and Argentina. South America constitutes a rich context for analysis due to its distinct path through neoliberalism in the context of authoritarianism and democratisation, as well as its long history of mobilisation at the local level.

The paper highlights the opportunity for expanding and deepening municipalist theory to accommodate variegated forms of municipal organisation located in South America; in doing so, its overarching argument is that municipalism must be acknowledged to take a multitude of forms that may well challenge the discreet rubric upon which NM is based. The examination of crisis, temporality and divergent paths in the period of post-neoliberalism draws attention to the need for a more comprehensive analysis of the key features of municipalism in different social and political contexts. While a broad approach is adopted in this paper, it reveals clear opportunities for further research into, for example, the concept of “dual power” and how this can be interpreted in the context of long-standing features of state-civil society relations in South America including discussions about state cooptation of social movements and paternalism. Similarly, how a strategy of dual power plays out over a longer time frame and across election cycles.

Although it is difficult to allege the existence of a current major tendency of emerging NM projects in the region, recent experiences in South America are highly significant in the broader context of the recreation of political projects of leftist parties and social movements. While these have links with European NM movements, we have established that it is vital to remember that municipalism is not a new phenomenon in the region and that analysis of these includes existing

theoretical coordinates in Latin American scholarship. While the influence of European NM projects has been an inspiration in some cases, overall NM projects in South America are distinctly reconsidered from the trajectory of territorial struggles of social movements. This potentially opens up an interesting point of dialogue between theoretical work on the two regions.

The analysis also indicates the need for greater attention to integrating key concepts of NM with fundamental and long-standing concepts bound up with scholarship on urban politics in South America. The discussion of territory in this paper begins this process and can be viewed as part of the ongoing and enriching process of “decolonising” concepts and assumptions in urban studies. In particular, we emphasise the way that the concept of territorial municipalism is useful for understanding how social movements in Chile and Argentina attempt to both resist the neoliberal enclosure of the city, through defending particular neighbourhoods and articulating place-based projects for social cooperation and commons. At the same time, such territorial strategies remain located within a broader NM vision in the ways that they seek to work through and beyond the state at different scales.

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