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The municipalist revolution

Naples shows how local democracy can defy the neoliberal paradigm

In times of a globalised, neoliberal economy and a deep crisis of national sovereignty, the so-called 'new municipalist' wave has gained some traction around Europe, not least in European cities with progressive municipal administrations: Barcelona, Cadiz, Amsterdam, Grenoble, Naples and others.

In these cities, citizens rejected traditional parties because of corruption, indiscriminate cuts to social spending and the widening gap between *governors* and *governed*. Instead, municipalists saw an opportunity to take back power over their cities through local elections. Led by civic movements, civil society and participatory urban platforms, their political agenda often originated from social causes, for example the battle against evictions from public housing in Barcelona, or a mobilisation against environmental injustice in Naples.

All 'new municipalist' cities have a common guideline: people before profits and citizens before the laws of the market. This means that political priorities are defined by the respect for social rights, for public and commons properties against neoliberal looting. Therefore, they experiment with innovative models of citizenship and participation, promote public ownership of services, expanded affordable housing, urban ecology and sustainable energy.

The case of Naples

In Naples, the outsider candidate Luigi de Magistris, only supported by local movements and civil society, won the municipal elections for the first time in 2011. This was preceded by a dramatic crisis of waste disposal which covered all the streets of city and suburbs with rubbish and which became the symbolic point of no-return for the old local politicians.

From 2011 until now, the new local government faced a lot of small and

big battles against vested interests, the national government and European directives. Maybe the most important one is against what we call *illegitimate debt*, the debt of the city which was generated by bank interests, financial toxic products, corruption on public works and so on. An enormous part of this debt originated from emergency measures following a devastating earthquake in 1980 and the waste crisis in 2008.

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In the case of Naples, it amounts to several hundred million euros and severely affects the possibility to provide for the local population's needs. That's why Naples started a campaign, also involving other cities like Turin who are facing similar conditions of near-insolvency. The campaign advocates initiating, at a national and at an EU level, an audit on municipal debt in order to break it down, find toxic debt like banker's interests and ask for its elimination.

On the other side, Naples is considered the leading city for defending common goods and common properties in Italy. In 2011 for instance, the Italian people voted in a nation-wide referendum against the privatisation of water and local public services. While most other Italian majors during these years betrayed the result of the referendum, Naples decided to comply with it and keep water a public good.

The housing crisis

The municipality also decided to approve resolutions about the recognition (not legalisation) of a third kind of social spaces, neither public nor private, but common. These resolutions recognised the local assemblies which formed to administer occupied spaces as their only sovereign bodies and, for this reason, as the only decision making bodies. This stands in absolute contrast to the approach of many national governments, which are evicting an enormous number of self-managed spaces day by day.

The new municipalist administration in Naples has also facilitated a democratic process to decide the demolition of the popular housing complex named 'Vele' in Scampia, a suburb in the north area of the city. Vele is an enormous, unfinished agglomeration of public houses which have been occupied since 1980, when the earthquake caused a massive housing emergency.

For 38 years now, thousands of people have been living inside these crumbling buildings, ironically called *maximum security prison* by their

residents. During all these years, a popular committee of activists has fought for their demolition and for the construction of new houses. So the municipality of Naples wrote, together with the University of Naples and the local popular committee, a plan for the demolition and reconstruction of the Vele area. Finally, the Italian national government decided to provide the financing, so in the next years the local inhabitant's utopia might become reality.

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Finally, after a significant rise in the number of tourists visiting the city, Naples' local government decided to open a public debate about strategies to stop harmful 'touristification' and gentrification of the ancient centre and to regulate the wild market for short-term rentals like Airbnb. The numbers of tourists in Naples might not yet be comparable to Barcelona, Venice or Paris, but its steep rise is definitely alarming. In a few years, it might be as high as in the other cities. That's why it's important to find effective countermeasures now.

The need for a European network

All these challenges, however, risk to remain isolated battles if Naples, like other 'new municipalist' Italian and European cities don't find a way to build a strong network that can advocate their common cause.

Just to give two concrete examples: Naples' massive fight against illegitimate debt would be more effective if, at a European level, all cities lobby the EU to cancel all toxic loans from public debt. The strategies against touristification would also have a bigger impact if all cities organise a common initiative against Airbnb.

There's already a good example of how that can work: The largely unnoticed upcoming revision of the EU's Bolkenstein Directive, a directive from 2006 that seeks to liberalise all services across the EU, essentially requires municipalities to ask the European Commission's permission before enacting new local measures. This would seriously limit the political space for local progressive administrations, given the EU's notorious focus on competitiveness. However, the revision was met with a unified voice from over 75 civil society groups, unions, mayors and progressive parties in a protest letter to the current Austrian EU Presidency, which promptly cancelled upcoming talks.

Considering this, maybe the next EU elections could give us municipalists the opportunity to unite all these struggles and experiences. Because ‘new municipalism’ might just be the only really innovative process inside the European left.



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