

New Municipalism, New Culture, New Democracy

Igor Stokfiszewski

Municipalism + Culture = Democracy

Culture helps you build the world you want to see. Democracy needs your imagination

Today the forces of Municipalism and Culture are interdependent and merged to create a profound and sustainable shift in policy and politics and, most critically, in lived experience for the many and not the few in the journey towards a new democracy. This short paper explores why and how Culture and Municipalism are together shaping a new reality and asks urgent questions about how we can better understand, and fully realise, the powerful potential of this confluence for the transformation of both politics and culture.

The desire to have greater agency and creativity in our own lives, and the possibility of shaping the realities that surround us - not just accepting predetermined options - are vital impulses of our time. The loud and consistent demands for the establishment of a "real democracy" resounded for many months on the squares and streets of cities in Europe and far beyond. This was driven by people expressing their belief that, after the global economic crisis of 2008, it is impossible to maintain the current political and economic regime. The toxic regime that itself caused the crisis in the first place resists all calls for change, yet cannot provide a meaningful life and sense of influence and imagination to shape the world we want. The most crucial responses to this system failure have been in two areas. The first is the political expression of "new municipalism": the institutional practice of city governance, in the spirit of respect for the right to the city and the commons, by grassroots political civic platforms. The second has been the flourishing of "new culture": a set of practices and organisational solutions that follow the principles of participation, critical thinking, empowering others, creating community and ultimately transforming lived realities and possibilities. New municipalism and new culture express the same fire of the era. They are founded on self-organisation, self-determination and self-governance as essential sparks of the new democracy.

As ever, this new fire has multiple competitors: deeply entrenched nationalism, populism and neoliberal dogmatism. These malign forces oppose the desire for a new democracy and strive for an accelerated authoritarianism. To counteract these forces, we must redouble our efforts to practice, understand and implement solutions for civic participation, critical thinking and the strengthening of community to help change realities in line with people's expectations and dreams. Many municipalist actors and cultural activists are experimenting to find new practices and narratives that challenge power and change realities within their own communities, however, the duplication of their efforts means that we also need to nurture closer and stronger local and transnational alliances and build collective intelligence and action. The flames of new municipalism and new culture leap together and we need to understand the relationship between these two phenomena to most fully respond to the call for a new democracy.

This article tries to lay the foundations for this understanding. It is the result of a lively dialogue between people involved in a new culture and a new municipalism. This dialogue has been going on for years, but it has had its key moments. One of these was in Spring 2018, when, at the initiative of the European Cultural Foundation, people from municipalist political platforms, civil society organizations, social movements and the cultural circles, drawn from across the continent, gathered in Amsterdam. The purpose of this encounter was to create a space to exchange knowledge and practice, to build closer intellectual, political and practical ties between new municipalism and new culture and thereby suggest new ways to ignite "real democracy" in Europe and beyond. What follows is based on the knowledge generated in the exchange process initiated through that gathering and since.

Municipalism and Culture: Interdependence

Let's start with two questions: firstly, what do cultural perceptions of reality, cultural practices and cultural studies bring to municipalism as a new institutional political activity? And secondly, how can municipalism positively influence the rise and flourishing of a new culture?

What distinguishes new municipalism is that it is the only institutional implementation of the new democracy available to us. There are ongoing experiments to establish

national political parties and transnational social movements reflecting the need for a policy based on self-organisation, self-determination and self-governance, but only municipalism has the experience of actually being in power. Hence its unique character. To what extent can a new democratic policy be implemented? Where are the barriers that block its effective execution? We will find answers to these questions only in the experience of civic political platforms of governing cities or of operating in municipal authorities.

Municipalism needs culture because only social and political movements, which are also cultural movements, are capable of establishing a new reality. And, municipalism is threatened by impermanence – what if the movements lose elections? Only when politics constitutes new types of subjectivity, (re-)imagination, collective relations, communities that use a language that reflects their identity, through a combination of their codes and symbols, is it possible to undergo a lasting social transformation that is the driving force behind a lasting political change. Municipalism conceiving of itself as a cultural movement is able to create and root a new democratic political culture – ways of acting, understanding and experiencing reality in all its dimensions – making a lasting transformation of the institutions of power in the spirit of a new democracy.

Why does culture need municipalism? Because the new approaches in culture emerged primarily outside of the institutions of power - in social movements, informal groups, civil society organisations and social economy entities. Like municipalism too there is therefore the threat of impermanence. The new culture needs public policies that will value and validate it, allow it to develop and, consequently, permanently influence the political and democratic culture. And today, municipalism is an essential, if not the only, context in which such policies can be understood, developed and implemented.

The basic interdependence between municipalism and culture lies in the fact that municipalism can develop only strengthened by cultural transformation, which can only be established through a new cultural practice supported by municipalism.

Political Culture of Municipalism

Municipalism, strengthened by the cultural dimension, reveals its greatest potential for changing reality by forging a new political culture. This is a democratic culture founded

on civic - and not on economic or market - values, drawing upon needs and ideas collectively generated by citizens themselves and practiced in the everyday, lived experience of what it is to be human. These values are focused on two core tenets in particular: the feminisation of politics and political ecology.

Feminisation, writes Laura Roth and Kate Shea Baird, means in the first place "changing the ways of doing politics"^[i]. "Feminisation aims to shatter masculine patterns that reward behaviours such as competition, urgency, hierarchy and homogeneity, which are less common in, or appealing to, women. Instead, a feminised politics seeks to emphasise the importance of the small, the relational, the everyday, challenging the artificial division between the personal and the political." "Feminising politics", concludes Laura Roth elsewhere, "means a) gender parity in all spaces, acts and roles; b) political programmes that fight against a patriarchal system reflected in institutional structures and public policies; c) changing the way we do politics: breaking the separation between the "public" and the "private", horizontalising decision-making, withdrawing from confrontational approaches and instead emphasising the common and relational, and embracing diversity as a natural element of politics instead of an anomaly"^[ii]. Feminisation also enhances the reproductive activities related to care, regeneration and solicitude for the common good, the exercise of which is a condition for sustaining life.

Secondly, the ecological approach that characterises the political culture of municipalism has two dimensions. The first is care for the natural environment. This care is derived from attachment to the commons as a central category that differentiates the new democracy from the one oriented towards private property, personal gain and the exploitation of natural, material and non-material resources by the political and economic order prevailing before the economic crisis. High quality of the natural environment is a condition for high quality of human life.

The other dimension of the ecological approach goes back to the ecological imagination as the basis for shaping a common life. This imagination is associated with sensitivity to the renewal of the collective body, the understanding that social processes are organic processes and seeing the social system as an ecosystem of many

interdependent actors or entities. Renewal of the collective body is dependent on valuing reproductive activities over material production alone. This organic approach to social transformation is a process that takes into account the realities of people participating in it and is sensitive to their contexts and their inclusion in the process itself. It is also able to adapt to the changing situation and the effects of the process – its impact on people and the environment. The ecological approach both analyses relationships between different entities, social groups and classes that coexist on symbiotic principles, whether antagonistic or parasitic, and recognises the value of diversity as "a natural element of politics instead of an anomaly".

Both the feminisation of politics and the ecological approach are the foundations of the political culture of municipalism. They define a new approach to relations between institutions and their social context, to relations within political institutions themselves and to the development of public policies.

Municipalism and Public Policies

How does the political culture of municipalism determine the creation and implementation of urban civic and public policies? Following the path of feminisation and ecology, municipalism first asks what entities should be involved in their creation. The urban ecosystem in each of its contexts is a collection of people creating a given area of life, their social partners, citizens of the city and finally – the municipal authorities. The creation of public policies in the spirit of feminisation happens through a dialogue of all the entities. Municipalism works with and through a new urban subjectivity – mediators, facilitators, moderators supporting the viability and effectiveness of social and political dialogue. These can be civic organisations, social movements or individuals able to skillfully carry out collective and creative processes. Finally, the political culture of municipalism has to look at the social, cultural, ecological and economic impact of public policies.

Organic thinking also sets a new standard for the implementation of public policies: it prototypes solutions based on an open source approach and evaluates the results,

and most of all it continuously sustains citizens' participation in the implementation of public policies, because the impact of these policies belong to the citizens.

Municipalism and Cultural Policies

The interdependence between culture and municipalism begins with the cultural dimensions of municipalist strategies, and leads on to the creation and consolidation of a new political culture forged in the institutional practices of municipalism, then eventually to the kinds of cultural policies proposed by the municipalist paradigm.

Municipalism understands culture as far broader than the traditional cultural institutions of municipal authorities. It sees culture as the result of the social connections of the city ecology. Cultural policies must therefore reflect the multiplicity of culture-creating actors and the diversity of their subjectivity, with particular emphasis on the validation of grassroots, civic forms of making culture. The foundation of the municipalist approach to culture is 'cultural democracy', but also includes the 'democratisation' of the existing culture. That is why it is so important to introduce innovative organisational, institutional and managerial solutions focused on participation and the democratisation of decision-making chains, the prototyping of organisational and institutional solutions and their evaluation, towards the decentralisation of culture.

The cultural policies of municipalism must work to enhance reproductive activities as the basis for cultural production. This means validating culture-creating activities that care for the common good and regeneration, and undermine the primacy of 20th century models of cultural economic production, extraction and commodification. Environmental responsibility must accompany the design, creation and implementation of policies for cultural production.

Municipalism and Culture: Tensions

The urban culture ecosystem is made up of entities that remain not only in a symbiotic relationship with each other, but also at times those in the antagonistic relationship. Culture is created in the public sector, the social sector, the commercial sector consisting of cultural industries and creative industries, and can also be carried out in

the sector of religious institutions. Not all of them remain in the alliance with each other. Sometimes they are almost exclusive.

In the aforementioned speech, Laura Roth emphasises the existence of indelible "productive tensions" within municipalism: between political institutions and social movements, between uninterrupted dialogue and the need to implement solutions, between the paradigm of participation and an endemic patriarchal culture, that is antithetical to participation and does not respect it.

"Productive tensions" exist and will always exist inside the urban culture ecosystem. Tension between the social and the commercial, the public and the religious sectors. And the tension between opening up culture to unrestricted citizen-driven collective action and participation and the treatment of cultural products as goods designed for market commodification. As well as the tension between social classes and their lifestyles.

But these tensions and choices can be fuel for critical thinking and the process of a new democracy. Generating and positively working with "productive tensions" is perhaps a key element of the political culture that municipalism establishes. They maintain diversity as a natural element of politics with continuous participation, dialogue and collective action. Whether municipalism it is defined as a political or cultural movement, or as both, the most important things is to retain the fire of "the movement".

[i] Laura Roth, Kate Shea Baird, *Municipalism and the Feminization of Politics*, ROAR Magazine (roarmag.org), <https://bit.ly/2eIrhbu>.

[ii] Laura Roth, *Which municipalism? Let's be choosy*, OpenDemocracy.net, <https://bit.ly/2SKqE3c>.