

Culture + Commoning + Confederation = NEW CITIZENSHIP

By Shelagh Wright and Peter Jenkinson

'The trepidation is that these new municipalist movements are a return to a parochial politics. Common arguments are that these municipal initiatives do not go beyond an attempt to build little anarchist or socialist islands of autonomy, isolated from a more substantial internationalist political project. There is also a latent danger of municipalist projects falling into the "local trap" — erroneously claiming the municipality to have some form of inherently "progressive" qualities — rather than adopting it as a strategic site for social transformation.'

Laura Roth, Internationalism and the New Municipalism, October 2018

New municipalism, as anti-authoritarian, anti-racist movements all over the world, are working to take power where they live. But there is also a toxic strain of localism - self-described localist movements as well as nationalist movements - that simultaneously have also won elections with xenophobic and fascist platforms and that have cynically and dishonestly appropriated the more typically progressive, anti-authoritarian language of 'autonomy' and 'direct democracy'. If a diverse, egalitarian, and ecological new municipal politics is to be genuine, then we need strategies and tactics to address these dark and threatening tendencies.

Social isolation feeds a steady supply of alienated people to the far-right, and their feelings of wanting to 'take back control'. New municipalism seeks parity in all spaces, acts and roles to change the way politics is done through horizontal decision-making, withdrawing from confrontational approaches and embracing diversity as a natural element of culture, society and politics. Creative and cultural spaces for collective making, imagining and questioning are all ways of offering people means to build new relationships and alliances - across gender, race, class and all other forms of difference - and address loneliness, isolation and manipulative and punitive 'othering'.

One of the biggest issues of our era is migration forced by climate, economic and political instability and violence. New municipalism, through Sanctuary Cities, Rebel Cities and multiple initiatives of solidarity with 'others' (refugees or immigrants) has sought a positive response. It has recognised that municipalities have a great responsibility and capability to confront global problems, and that municipalist organisations and governments must support one another in order to reinforce

themselves at other levels. In doing so it has also affirmed an internationalism or global horizon of looking outwards for development as well as looking into its own localities. Interdependence is what makes municipalism unique among locally oriented political ideas. Rather than withdrawing from global affairs and obligations, movements look to the commons and confederation to radically restructure the balance of power in how decisions are made towards ordinary people wherever they are, be that locally, regionally, or globally.

Inclusive by nature, the 'commons' enables grassroots political participation by affected individuals and communities. But this new narrative is also grounded in scalable practices that are accessible to change makers and civil-society organisations on many different localities. 'Confederation' is the defining principle of community autonomy, but also of interdependence.

But there is a third 'c' in the equation, 'culture', in the game plan for building a new political vision fit for the challenges of our time for the protection of human rights and radical democracy. Constructing open processes for all people to collaborate and co-create with each other, intimately and at a distance, within the city and beyond it, in order to shape their lives in generous but meaningful and necessary ways, is essential to the new municipalism.

A City Made by People: We Are Here (WAH), Amsterdam Collective action by and with migrants and refugees in the city

*'People ARE present when they are not hiding. People are WE when they are together. People are HERE when they move together. WE are more....We Are Here has given inspiration and a window to see another world as well as offering us a mirror to see ourselves and our society in a different light. **Now, We Are Everywhere.**'*

Jo Van Der Spek, 2017



Since 2011 irregular migrants, refused asylum seekers, undocumented aliens along with existing citizens of Amsterdam, have become a movement: We Are Here. They have made themselves collectively visible, out in the open as a 'show-and-tell' methodology to be recognised as individual people. They say 'we do not count numbers of 'others' because everybody counts'.

Their collective resistance started by occupying the Diakoni Garden in Amsterdam. They were tired of living in invisibility and decided to put themselves and the inhuman situation in which they are forced to live in the spotlight. They said 'we are here, we are human beings, and we deserve to be treated with respect'. Soon after, the group started

to squat empty buildings in Amsterdam, taking their destiny into their own hands. The squatting, of over thirty buildings over the years, also serves as a mode of resistance. By presenting themselves in the spotlight and performing their existence, they aim to put pressure on the media and politicians to also take responsibility for the situation they are in.

Mainstream politicians and the media formulate the 'problem' in the abstract, as too many migrants, too much trouble, risk and, a reluctance to see and hear the personal and concrete. But migration is a personal story, a challenge for our relationship to the other. WAH is about presence and presentation. It is the visible demonstration, that something is wrong with the system and a creative call for citizens to act together for political change. Being visible as a group is the basis of presentation. Presence and presentation has meant a place, a building, becoming a 'visible collective of the refused' and creative acts of making and hanging banners, making and handing out flyers and co-creating actions.

But co-creation is difficult. Lots of great actions, ideas, initiatives and artworks were proposed by well-meaning students, occupiers, mothers, artists and teachers but many in the refugee collective were reluctant to go along with these for this is part of the problem. Some had their own ideas about what to do and do together. The power to define is the struggle of people that are usually rendered invisible, unheard, disposable. This can be a progressive or a retrogressive power, depending on how and with whom it is shared and shaped.

New democracy starts from the ground up, when normal people have the capability to take up their own destiny and create a coalition to reshape realities but this is complex work. The movements need to learn more together, across geographies and context about how true co-creation and agency in the shaping and presentation of our individual and collective stories and imagined futures really works. A contribution to the cultural commons on co-creation values, practices and strategies would be invaluable across the confederation of new municipalism, and to inspire and inform other movements and administrations.

No.11 Arts, Birmingham, UK (not to be confused with Alabama) Shaping cultural commoning for diversity

'any venue housing an institution dedicated to the arts is no more a centre of culture than any other city location where citizens live, work or gather together.' No.11 Arts. 2018

No. 11 Arts is a Birmingham-based practice that is helping to shape processes of cultural commoning. They work to foster a shared and mutual power balance between two forms of possible authority: practices and processes that come from capability in arts and

culture, and relevance and vitality that comes from the full range of citizens' lived experience.

Culture is a lived and shared resource because it is always the product of a group of people or a community. In every form, culture requires at least some degree of human interaction or transmission in order to be produced and shared. At the same time, any culture acquires a value for the people who share and adopt it. Any form of culture therefore helps express the identity of groups and communities, either their exceptionalism or their diversity. Cultural commons are ways of managing the sharing of information or cultural resources and ensuring all citizen's ability to produce and share.



With this understanding of cultural Commons, No. 11 Arts worked with a consortium of local universities to conduct open-ended 'creative consultations' with all kinds of citizens about re-shaping urban services, such as transport, policing, housing, open spaces, vagrancy. Artist-facilitators co-designed activities with contrasting resident groups, sharing processes for them to articulate how they saw themselves in relation to the provision of urban services and specifically how they could be

more actively engaged. The groups chose to engage in yarn-bombing their neighbourhood, composing rap lyrics about the buses and creating a community quilt highlighting the diversity of what, and who, they valued in their environment. Citizen

perspectives on urban service providers, revealed through these activities, were notably different from the ways in which providers see citizens.

The programme co-created with local people in open-ended ways so that they acquired the capacity for invention and sense of empowerment necessary for sustained civic activism. Engaging people in creative activity often feels safe and non-intrusive and welcomes people from diverse background and cultures to a shared activity. Very often people brought together through an creative or cultural activity then begin to discuss other things that concern them. For example, people may be so caught up in the activity of sewing textiles that they forget about obvious differences and simply chat away about things that are important to them whether that is local statutory services, concerns about their children/grandchildren or needs linked to health.

Collaborating with three widely differing communities, No. 11 Arts was able to show that citizens, regardless of their collective profiles, urban locations and diversified personal circumstances, had strong, though markedly different, views on urban services. Young black men, for example, are concerned about lack of WiFi on buses because it impedes their music-making which they see as a way out of their immediate environment. Dispirited people who feel marginalised, ignored and neglected are nevertheless finding, as far as they are able, their own ways of imagining and improving their quality of life and meeting what they see as immediately local needs.

A Poem by Catriona Heatherington

*Our Birmingham of a thousand trades
Booms out its constant serenades,
Winding and whirring,
Making and building,
Grinding and stirring,
Shaking and gilding,
This uniquely urban symphony
With hubbed and lugged crescendos
And flyovered cacophony,
But so many speak in staccattoed diminuendos,
Too far out and distant,
no longer clear,
Lost in the silence of invisibility,
Suburban voices we cannot hear,
In the bold vastness of our city,
So we form the pole of a listening arts umbrella
By binding ourselves tight and strong together,
Then, unfurling our hearts across the circumference of Birmingham's boundary,
We make a giant whispering gallery,
So the hesitant and lonely,
Can be heard with perfect clarity
In our cupola of artistic creativity
Where co-design grows fresh community
And welcomes spoken in so many different serenades
Become our language of a thousand trades*