

# Looking Beyond Electoralism: Radical Municipalism in the UK?

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Now that the dust has settled after the disastrous results of December 12th, it's time to seriously reconsider the approach of the left in the UK. The electoral defeat of Corbynism has opened up a space for such analysis. As someone who has been somewhat involved in activism both outside of and within the Labour party, I am keenly aware that this is a painful and arduous process for activists who poured a great deal of time and energy into fighting for Corbyn's Labour. However, the election laid bare serious flaws with electoralism as a strategy for radical change in the UK. Many on the left have laid the blame for defeat at the door of Brexit and whilst I broadly agree with this, it's imperative that we also examine why Brexit became such a central issue and why the left was incapable of addressing that issue.

This failure to address Brexit in part stems from a failure to get a left-wing narrative out to the general public. This issue may be caused by an increasingly monopolized media, but there needs to be more work done about this problem. Without work in this area, the left will never be able to address anti-immigration narratives that have been building for decades nor will it be able to change a general feeling of pessimism that surrounds radical or transformative politics.

What we desperately need to be doing then, is looking at forms of organizing, particularly new municipalist movements, that are gaining traction in post-industrial contexts. For example, the municipalist movement Barcelona En Comú focuses on local grassroots organizing to build support for radical politics through "small victories that prove things can be done differently, from both inside and outside local institutions". This grassroots politics is already starting to take shape with tenants' unions, militant unions and municipalist groups such as Cooperation Kentish Town gaining traction across the country. If the massive energy and large network of energized activists mobilized by Labour and Momentum could be channeled into such politics, there is perhaps a chance of building a radical infrastructure capable of providing radical change.

## **What Went Wrong? Looking Beyond Brexit**

The most striking feature of Labour's defeat in the general election was the loss of working-class areas across England and Wales who were traditionally loyal to Labour and voted overwhelmingly for Brexit. So far, this narrative is fairly conventional and for much of the Labour left this implies a need to fully embrace Brexit or at least wait until it 'blows over'. This is however too simplistic and fails to get to the root of why the left has been unable to address Brexit with any real confidence. Kim Moody's detailed analysis of the election provides a very useful view of the complexities of such failings. For the purposes of this essay, however, we can focus on two key issues which caused such failings; firstly, the left has lost the anti-globalization narrative to the right and secondly a failure to address head on the right wing anti-immigrant rhetoric which has been used as an explanation for why globalization has decimated working-class communities.

Decades of mostly uncontested (in the mainstream at least) narratives about immigration which grow more intense and delusional by the day is a reality that we must face head on. Undoing this is no easy task and cannot be side-stepped without having to face it again at a later date. Letting the wound fester is not going to save us. We need to face this challenge head-on in a way that recognizes how big a hurdle these ideas are to the left. It can't be ignored, and it will be a difficult and up-hill struggle. This is partly an issue with electoralism. Undoing decades of anti-immigration narratives isn't a task suited to the fast-moving world of parliamentary politics especially when faced with a hostile press.

It is also important here to ensure that such analysis does not fall into the trap of classism. These anti-immigration narratives are just as prevalent among the middle-classes and elites, but they are unlikely to be convinced by left wing alternatives. It is not that the working class are more prone to such arguments but that these arguments are prevalent throughout British society.

Rohini Hensman provides a strong counterargument to assertions that Brexit was not necessarily predominantly concerned with racism or anti-migrant politics. For example, she highlights the right-wing media's focus on Turkey joining the EU and a possible influx of Muslim migrants during Brexit, as exemplary of the kind of narratives which drove Brexit. Importantly, she notes how Corbyn's Labour made some attempts to discuss globalization early in 2017, but often failed to emphasize the importance of antiracism and pro-migrant politics in such discussions.

Hensman also provides a compelling argument that Labour should have "launched a powerful anti-racist campaign depicting immigrants as friends and neighbours, teachers, doctors, nurses and care workers, people whose work benefits society and whose tax and National Insurance payments contribute to Britain's economy". Whilst also promoting "compassion for refugees and attempts to help them in their home countries". Such an approach would undoubtedly have been better in going some way towards challenging the far-right narratives behind Brexit and much of the discussion on immigration.

However, the Labour left, and the left more generally lack the kind of platform needed to get such messaging out to the public quickly and consistently enough to win electoral victories. Such a campaign would also need more focus on the kinds of exploitation faced by migrant workers. Focusing on migrants' contribution to the economy is unlikely to be convincing to those who feel left behind by the very same economy. Instead it would be better to challenge the way that racism and migrants' precarious status are used to break solidarity and increase exploitation. The focus should be on blaming bosses and businesses for this and promoting more solidarity and labour union work that unites all workers in challenging such exploitation.

## **Confronting Nationalism and the Monopoly of Right-Wing Media**

To counter this pervasive nationalism then, there is an urgent need to build a new left-wing internationalism which is staunchly anti-globalization and capable of presenting a convincing narrative against the rising tide of far-right nationalism.

Such an internationalism needs to grapple with a nationalism that preys on very real concerns about globalization, the cost of living, low wages and the housing crisis by falsely laying the blame for such issues at the feet of migrants rather than the powerful corporations and political elites who manufactured post-industrial decline and imperialist wars. The free-trade deals and de-regulation pushed by such politics reveal that such nationalism is simply globalization by another name. Instead of paying lip-service to progressive values it is openly racist and xenophobic. Addressing this head on and unmasking its contradictions is the only way we can begin to challenge its stranglehold over politics.

This challenge is difficult because of an increasingly monopolized media which effectively drowns out any narratives other than the old 'progressive' neoliberalism or the new far-right politics gaining traction globally. The left's inability to challenge these narratives (in countries like the UK at least) can be explained by our post-industrial context. With major defeats of the labor movement by politicians like Thatcher, one of the key means of information distribution for the left was left severely weakened. Unions provided both a key means of providing alternative narratives to people across the country and a force for political change which could limit the encroachment of the right.

With their defeat the UK has seen its media monopolized by an increasingly small and influential group of billionaires closely tied to corporate power and political elites. A similar process can be observed in countries like the USA or Australia and closely follows the model laid out by Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*. This is all something that the left is keenly aware of but telling the world about this media bias is not enough. Even if such narratives can gain traction, they have to fight the effect of mere exposure. People are physiologically more likely to believe something they have been exposed to repeatedly.

New left media in the UK has done some important work in trying to challenge this monopoly and this saw some positive results in the 2017 elections, but these efforts clearly aren't enough. This is partly because such outlets rely on the pre-existing left for much of their audience, expanding your audience beyond this is difficult. Building a bigger and more receptive audience is clearly key then. It is also important to note that 2017 managed to evade Brexit, so the left could bring in new narratives around austerity fairly effectively. However, such narratives did not necessarily challenge Brexit or anti-immigration sentiment head-on. What's needed then is a new approach to building the kind of internationalism and organizational power that can challenge this rampant nationalism.

### **Towards a Municipalist Internationalism**

At first glance municipalist movements' focus on direct democracy and the local might seem at odds with such internationalism. However, a key aspect of such movements' strategies has been an internationalism premised on the need to confederate communities not just nationally but across borders. As Debbie Bookchin and Sixtine Van Outvyre argue, "by themselves, these democratic popular assemblies will not be strong enough to build a counter-power able to confront the power of capitalism and the state, or to eventually replace them." Instead they must work to be mutually reinforcing sharing both resources and knowledge, but for this to function these movements need to be strong at the local level.

This process of international solidarity is already one that is taking place globally. In North America, the collective umbrella group Symbiosis represents a move by such movements to share their local successes and escalate such strategies "towards a strong network, or confederation". Meanwhile,

the Fearless Cities initiative, supported by organizations like Barcelona en Comú, has worked on similar networking for municipalist movements globally to share knowledge and enter dialogue with each other.

There has also been a great deal of dialogue between these movements, Democratic Confederalists in Kurdistan, and the Zapatistas. For example, with expressions of solidarity between the Zapatistas and the revolution in Rojava. It is no surprise then that movements like Barcelona en Comú are explicit in identifying their politics with the revolutionary movements of the Zapatistas and Rojava (page 7 of the *Fearless Cities* book). A radical municipalist internationalism then is not just a possibility but a process that is already under way. Such politics then might hold the key to uniting local democracy with the ability to address the global threat of international capitalism.

An internationalism built on these municipalist politics then might go some way towards a more nuanced and engaging vision of international solidarity than what Hensman terms the 'pseudo-anti-imperialism' of Corbyn's foreign policy. Hensman correctly identifies the simplistic analysis of Corbyn's team especially over the Syrian conflict as a fatal flaw. The difficulty of course is that international conflicts, especially ones as multi-faceted as the Syrian civil war, are complex affairs. This makes them unsuited to the simplistic and fast-paced news cycle surrounding electoralism and difficult to explain to a public who understandably have more immediate domestic concerns.

Hensman's analysis does however elide the important role of democratic forces in the majority Kurdish region of Northeastern Syria. As an explicitly leftist movement which played a key role fighting ISIS, focusing solidarity on supporting them would make more sense. This is especially true with the Free Syrian Army having many within its ranks who are more closely aligned to Jihadist groups and the Turkish regime than they are to democratic politics.

Moreover, supporting the Kurds more explicitly would have allowed for a strong narrative on security; by highlighting the West's hypocrisy in opposing ISIS whilst supporting states like Turkey who have links to ISIS and other Jihadist groups. Similarly, the UK turning a blind eye to Jihadists fighting Gadhafi in Libya might add to a narrative that could successfully challenge the Conservatives' image of being strong on security. Instead the left could build a narrative suggesting that the right-wing and corporate interests are more interested in selling arms and maintaining regional control than providing security and stability.

In this regard then a radical municipalist internationalism could provide a strong avenue for a more complex and nuanced approach to anti-imperialism and international solidarity. The slower localist politics enable more in-depth discussions around such issues. Whilst the global network of such movements teaching each other about new challenges and approaches to building a better world, is a powerful example of why internationalism is important to people's everyday lives and not just a distant concern. Municipalist politics then could imbue internationalism with more than just the simplistic moralist approach often espoused by Labour. The movement's connections to the Kurdish Freedom movement would also strengthen its ability to produce more nuanced and convincing arguments around security, foreign policy and the Syrian conflict.

### **The Challenge of Fighting for Utopia in the Age of Capitalist Realism**

To get to the point where such internationalism is possible; we clearly need new models for organizing that can address this post-industrial landscape in a way that reaches people across the country. If radical municipalism is to do this successfully it will have to articulate a new internationalism whilst also addressing challenges at the grassroots level. Such modes of resistance will also need to address a pervasive cynicism about the prospects of radical change. Despite strong levels of support for many of Labour's more radical economic and social policies, there was an also a

sense that such ideas were unrealistic or too expensive. It is imperative then to confront the specter of what Mark Fisher referred to as *Capitalist Realism*. This deep anti-utopian cynicism is a major barrier to the kind of support the left needs to make genuine progress towards transformative politics.

In some sense this pessimism reflects the country's post-industrial context. No longer the heart of capitalist production, the UK's economic model instead relies on the financial sorcery which controls and profits from productive and extractive forces in the global South. It is no surprise then that the most fertile grounds for resistance have been against the property market and service industry. This is not to say that manufacturing is non-existent or irrelevant to the UK, but it clearly does not play the central role it did sixty or seventy years ago.

With a diminished need for a large workforce of manufacturers, miners or shipping workers many working-class communities became 'surplus to requirement'. Rather than a sense of being an integral but exploited part of the economy, whole swathes of the country became vilified as a drain on resources. Without the traditional leverage of industrial action to resist this, it is no wonder that a deep-seated sense of pessimism developed.

Persuading people of the possibility of real change is not going to be as easy as having a socialist Labour leader telling them such change is possible. Firstly, the message is unlikely to filter through a hostile media and secondly people are (understandably) cynical about such claims. This was something many activists encountered whilst canvassing. Even amongst Labour voters in working-class areas of London there was a sense that Labour only turned up every four years to garner votes. The left isn't going to win by turning up on doorsteps once every few years and convincing people about electoral candidates when this goes against the lived experiences of many marginalized people.

This is where radical municipalism's ability to produce 'small victories' focusing on the everyday needs at the local level is instrumental in rebuilding confidence in the possibility of genuine social transformation. People are more likely to get involved with a political movement that offers immediate support in the face of rampant landlordism, gentrification and miserable working conditions, as well as a broader long-term vision for a better society.

The radical municipalist approach for winning these 'small victories' is through building local institutions, like popular assemblies, community land trusts and cooperatives, alongside running for elections in local municipalities. Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi is a good example of this. Through democratically run cooperatives and community land trusts, they have become an important political force in the city of Jackson able to push back against gentrification whilst promoting economic and political self-determination for marginalized communities. Meanwhile, Barcelona En Comú exemplifies the localist electoral approach of some municipalists. Founded by members of the 15M protest movement and housing activists in Barcelona, the movement ran for city council elections on a municipalist platform based on proposals heard in public meetings across the city. With housing activist Ada Colau elected as mayor and a minority government in the city council Barcelona en Comú is undeniably a significant political force in Barcelona.

How a municipalist politics might look in the UK is uncertain and would need to be based on listening to the needs of local communities. The examples of Cooperation Jackson and Barcelona en Comú however, show that such movements have a great deal of potential for gaining traction and creating real change at the local level. There is a great deal that can be learnt from such organizations but crucially it's important to remember that there is no 'formula'. The power of such politics is their ability to adapt to local contexts and reflect the needs of communities.

## **Towards Dual Power and Grassroots Organizing**

The forms that such radical municipalism might take in the UK are difficult to pinpoint exactly, given the need for political projects which respond to specific local needs. The economic disparities and political differences between different regions of the UK mean that a municipalist movement in London is likely to be focusing on different issues or approaches than one in Manchester or Cornwall for example. Similarly, a municipalist movement in Scotland would obviously have to address questions of Scottish independence. The key strength of municipalism in such a context would be an ability to address such economic and political differences on the local level, whilst still being able to form networks and even confederations at national and regional levels.

There are however key similarities across the UK's post-industrial context which might make for fertile grounds for resistance and organizing. Firstly, Tenant's unions like ACORN, London Renters' Union, or Living Rent have seen a great deal of success by organizing tenants to take collective action against landlords. In the wake of the general election defeat, there has been a noticeable increase in activists getting involved with such organizations. In an economy where the property market is king, it makes sense that one of the most effective unionizing strategies focuses on fighting landlords. The localized and communal nature of such struggle also makes it a powerful way to build resilient communities. Whilst tenants' unions are not automatically municipalist in nature; their potential to form a part of building dual power is clear.

Another area of remarkable success has been in attempts to unionize the gig economy and outsourced workers. Smaller more militant unions have seen a great deal of success in organizing cleaners, delivery drivers and others to take militant strike action. Given the economy's increasingly service-orientated nature this makes sense. The precarious nature of such work especially within the gig economy means that municipalist politics could play an important role in providing some stability and community for syndicalist work.

Such organizing then can form the basis for resisting and even going on the offensive against post-industrial capitalism. However, they need a broader political movement to tie them into a coherent and resilient network of communities. So, whilst this is certainly a time to seriously consider what needs to change about how we organize this doesn't necessarily mean throwing away a great deal of important and successful work being done by activists across the country. Tenants' unions and new militant unions can play a key role here in supporting and being supported by such communities.

A relatively new but promising example of how such radical municipalism in the UK might look is Cooperation Kentish Town. Inspired by the successes of Cooperation Jackson, their work creating a community food center is based on hundreds of conversations with the local community and built on pre-existing activists' work in the community. People are more likely to get involved when they see people from their community, or at least who have shown themselves to be involved in it, working to produce real tangible change which listens directly to the concerns of the community. This isn't an easy thing to do but it's vital for creating a political movement with mass appeal.

How far such movements should engage in electoralism is another important issue to consider. Whilst movements like Barcelona en Comú have seen successes stemming from local elections, others like Cooperation Jackson are more wary after supporting elections of local candidates who failed to live up to the organization's principles. Even at a local level such electoralism can be a drain on resources and energy that could be better spent creating radical infrastructure. This doesn't preclude such electoral strategies, but they should be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism.

At the national scale organizations like Momentum have been making moves towards grassroots

organizing outside of electoral politics. Whilst, it's true that the energy and resources the Labour left could bring to municipal movements would be significant, we should be cautious about the possibility of such movements being subsumed into a centralized national electoral politics. Building a mass movement through radical municipalism would likely increase the possibility of electoral victories at a national level for left-wing parties, but this shouldn't be the end goal or the focus of such work.

There is a real need then for much of the energy mobilized by the Labour left to shift into this kind of work which can make a real difference to peoples' lives over the next few years. Crucially such work is much more convincing and powerful than trying to go toe-to-toe with a hostile media. This will only work if such grassroots organizing and democracy is given the resources and respect it deserves. Moreover, even if people feel a need to continue placing some resources in electoral politics this needs to be done with a healthy skepticism about parliamentary politics and respect for the crucial role grassroots organization should play. Such organizations could form a network that allows the left to get people to listen to (and have a say in) narratives which defy both neoliberalism and right-wing populism. People will only start to believe that another world is possible when they see it being built before them. Only then will the potential for radical change seem realistic or worth fighting for.

*Photo courtesy of Cooperation Town.*