RADICAL REMUNICIPALIZATIONS: REMAKING AND RECLAIMING PUBLIC SERVICES

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Debates about privatization have raged in academic journals for decades, largely polarized into two camps: for and against. There is, however, a newer and more refreshing conversation on the block that challenges this stale dichotomy – remunicipalization. Also known as 'reverse privatization' or 'insourcing', remunicipalization refers to processes of returning services back to public ownership and management after a period of private sector control.

More than 1,600 cases of remunicipalization in over 70 countries have been documented in services such as water, electricity, health care, transportation and waste management.[1] It can happen at various scales, for diverse reasons, and often involves a complex web of state institutions and non-governmental actors, representing one of the most intriguing shifts in public policy and grassroots activism of the last 20 years.[2]

Paradoxically, remunicipalization can be simultaneously expansive and narrow in scope. Expansive because many municipal services are immensely important to our social, economic, cultural and ecological welfare. While it may be a cliché, water is indeed 'life', and alongside other basic services such as electricity and transportation they are of vital importance to humanity. Having essential services such as these owned, socialized and operated publicly rather than privately can make an enormous difference to people's lives.

Remunicipalization is also expansive in the sense that it can be linked to larger political projects. As the literature on 'new municipalism' demonstrates, political activism at the local level has been re-animated in the past few decades, partly in response to the downloading phenomena of the neoliberal era and partly because municipal is the level of government that people can most readily engage in[3] (although it is not an entirely 'new' phenomenon

of course[4]). Bringing services back into public hands can be part of these municipal struggles and is sometimes a catalyst for broader political action.

Remunicipalization thus represents an important opportunity for progressive change: an opening of new political and economic terrain for socialist strategy and struggle (as per the theme of this issue of SR). Emerging 'out of the everyday but diverse local politics of social reproduction and a faltering neoliberalism', remunicipalization projects 'have much to offer a transformative and democratic left project',[5] creating opportunities for progressive socialist politics in ways that can address the multiple crises of climate, health and access to essential services.

But remunicipalizations can be remarkably narrow in scope as well. This is because most remunicipalization projects involve a single service in a single municipality, sometimes with very limited objectives (such as saving money). As Cumbers and Paul[6] are equally quick to note, 'there is nothing inherently progressive about remunicipalization'. It represents a 'systemic pushback against privatisation, but also an uncertain conjunctural political moment where many pathways are possible'. Some remunicipalizations are merely pragmatic and can swing back to the private sector at any time. Some are arguably worse than privatization, with control of essential services handed over to crony state capitalists and authoritarians, or in ways that conceal the commodifying effects of neoliberal state management. Even relatively progressive forms of remunicipalization can lull us into thinking they are more transformative than they really are. These potential 'closures' are just as important to identify as the 'openings' that remunicipalization offers, forcing us to carefully assess the potentials for moving towards more equitable and democratic forms of public services.

This essay provides an overview of this variegated terrain of remunicipalization while also attempting to advance debates on what radical/socialist forms of remunicipalization could look like, beginning with a brief historical review of remunicipalization in the *longue durée*, comparing contemporary efforts to (re)claim public services with similar struggles over a century ago.

BACK TO THE FUTURE?

The rapid industrialization of European and North American cities in the early 1800s was accompanied by a dramatic growth of networked services, provided almost universally by the private sector. Small and large firms sprung up to provide water, gas, transportation, waste management, health care and electricity services for growing productive and consumptive needs.[7] Where economies of scale and capital intensity mattered, there tended to be

large players – with some of the most important private utility companies in operation today owing their existence to this period, such as Suez, United Water and General Electric.[8] More localized services such as waste removal and healthcare were typically managed by small, sometimes informal, private providers, although consolidations quickly became the norm.

This laissez-faire approach to service development began to change in the mid to late 1800s with a push to municipalize facilities, whereby local state authorities took ownership and control of private services. This trend spread throughout Europe and North America and carried into the 1940s.[9] The overarching rationale for municipalization was that service provision by multiple providers was illogical and wasteful, particularly with natural monopolies such as water, gas and electricity, where it made little economic or regulatory sense to have multiple infrastructures. Outbreaks of cholera and other public health concerns added to the pressure. The British Parliament passed a series of public health measures, the first in 1848, mandating local authorities to take action, after which the municipalization movement in that country came to encompass an extraordinary range of public services, including slaughterhouses, cemeteries, crematoria, libraries, refuse and sewage disposal services, and even a sterilized milk depot.[10]

This enthusiasm for state ownership nevertheless hid competing and often antagonistic ideological motivations for municipal takeover. On the left, some advocates of 'municipal socialism' advanced a strong anti-capitalist sentiment, ridiculing the 'robber barons' of the day and tapping into a 'widespread anti-monopoly sentiment' that 'flowed easily into calls for public production and distribution of basic goods and service'.[11] But just how socialist this movement was remains disputed. Many critics saw these initiatives as far too compromised to create fundamental social and economic change, with no less a detractor than Vladimir Lenin declaring the municipalization trend to be incapable of bringing about larger socialist transformation.[12] These revolutionary critics disdained the gradualist municipal politics of the Fabians, rejecting the parliamentary road to socialism that they said these utility enterprises represented.

To the right were reform movement liberals who argued for municipalization on efficiency grounds, in part to combat the municipal socialism movement. John Stuart Mill, for example, took up the cause of water reform in Britain, criticizing what he saw as the wastefulness of fragmented private supply.[13] Similar arguments were made in the United States, where the commitment to municipal services was more a response to the corruption and ineffectiveness of private companies than any ideological strategy.[14] These pro-capitalist municipalizers were exemplified by the '*goo goos*' (short

for 'good government') of Chicago in the early 1900s, whose chief interest was to introduce 'business-like efficiency into city government'.[15]

This marketized form of municipalization was as much an attempt to promote private capital accumulation as it was to challenge it, with many policy makers seeing rationalized forms of public ownership of services as an effective way to enhance overall market growth. As MacKillop notes in the case of early water infrastructure in Los Angeles, 'public investments furthered private interests on a grand scale', as land developers pushed for public service extension to open new frontiers of accumulation.[16]

From the 1930s onwards, and escalating rapidly in the 1940s, there was a winding down of the municipalization movement and a scaling up of publicly owned services to the national and regional levels.[17] Much of this consolidation took place in sectors where new technologies and modes of governance made large, networked services possible, such as with electricity and health care, while water stayed mostly at the municipal level due to transportation costs.

Meanwhile, non-essential services such as municipal cinemas and restaurants disappeared altogether, often vilified for stifling entrepreneurship, leaving the field open to private enterprise. In effect, the emergence of *national* Fordist states took the wind out of *municipal* public service sails, advancing capital accumulation on increasingly national and global scales while squashing the potential for more radical redistributive initiatives locally.

By the 1970s, the pendulum had swung back towards private sector participation. This shift is well documented, but it is useful to highlight two important ways in which the current neoliberal moment differs from that of the liberal era that originally ushered in private services in the 1800s. Despite having been 'hollowed out' from four decades of austerity[18] neoliberal governments today are far more robust than their laissez faire cousins a century ago, with the potential to develop and maintain networked services in ways that were technically and politically inconceivable in the early 1900s, including a new range of governance technologies (such as smart meters) and a broader set of financial and informational resources to draw on. Further, the public sector itself has been fundamentally transformed by neoliberal practice and ideology, with many public agencies being run like private businesses, employing market-based management techniques, salary structures and performance evaluations.[19] As such, the breadth of what constitutes a 'public' service has been considerably expanded over the past century.[20]

CONTEMPORARY REMUNICIPALIZATION

By the late 1990s it was becoming clear that this second wave of privatization had not lived up to its promises of cheaper and more transparent service delivery. As long-term contracts came to an end, many were either not renewed or cancelled prematurely. Dozens of such remunicipalization cases were documented in the early 2000s, with the number then increasing dramatically after 2010. This was the year that Paris' water services were remunicipalized, which received considerable public and academic attention.[21]

It is impossible to know with certainty how many services have been remunicipalized in the past two decades, in part because many examples are small and likely to go unreported (e.g. bringing snowplowing back in-house). Furthermore, there is a lack of resources available to systematically track all forms of remunicipalization. The most notable efforts have come from a team of academics at the University of Glasgow in collaboration with the Transnational Institute and Public Services International (as part of the GLOBALMUN project)[22] who have identified more than 1,600 cases (as mentioned above) while continuing to update their database.[23]

Importantly, contemporary remunicipalization is a truly global phenomenon, with cases from Ghana, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Hungary, Argentina, Guinea, Tanzania, Malaysia, Bolivia and beyond. It is also multi-sectoral, with remunicipalizations taking place in water, health care, transportation and wide range of other services. It should also be noted, however, that the bulk of documented examples are concentrated in handful of countries (notably Germany, France and the United States) and sectors (notably water and electricity), limiting our understanding of other sectors and regions,[24] highlighting the need for further research.[25]

As impressive as this is, it should not be forgotten that privatization persists. Basic forms of divestiture and public-private partnerships of various stripes continue to take place – notably in so-called 'emerging' economies.[26] At the same time, new forms of private sector influence and marketization of the public sector have become more pronounced – notably via financialization.[27] Reliable data on these trends is also limited – the World Bank no longer systematically tracks privatization – but the scope and scale of privatization has arguably increased in some regions and sectors, making it important to continue monitoring these trends.

As to why remunicipalization is happening, every case is unique but there are common threads that emerge among them, typically involving the failure of a privatization project due to one or more of the following issues: rising prices, growing inequalities, worsening service quality, lack of

investment in infrastructure, lack of transparency in decision making, high costs of regulation, increasing levels of corruption, and exorbitant profit-taking.[28]

Not all cases of remunicipalization are due to private sector failure, however. In some instances, remunicipalization is done out of necessity, either because private companies have decided not to renew their contracts or because there are an insufficient number of bidders on a privatization tender. In some of these cases governments have been caught off-guard, unprepared for re-starting what can be a massive financial and administrative undertaking, highlighting the importance of being alert to the possibility of remunicipalization to avoid rushed decisions on major infrastructural matters (such as the cases of Hamilton, in Canada, and Buenos Aires, Argentina, where policy makers and activists alike had to scramble to work out new public water and sanitation systems).[29] Even governments in favour of privatization can find themselves in this position, particularly in low-income countries and sectors such as water and sanitation where financial risks have deterred private companies from taking contracts.[30]

DIFFERENT TYPES OF REMUNICIPALIZATION

The types of remunicipalization that have emerged are equally varied. Although it is impossible to say what percent of remunicipalizations fall into which categories, due to informational gaps, there is sufficient evidence to identify distinct typologies. Debates remain about the complex ideological nature of these different remunicipalization forms, but there is growing agreement as to their general characteristics.[31]

The first type of remunicipalization receives relatively little attention but is important to highlight. Categorized as *autocratic state capitalism*, these types of remunicipalization are characterized by reversals of privatization undertaken by relatively undemocratic, market-oriented governments as part of a more general shift towards state control of strategic sectors and enterprises in capitalist economies. In these cases, remunicipalization is driven as much by political and social objectives as economic ones, ranging from attempts to enhance national sovereignty to regulating and disciplining citizen behaviour. This form of remunicipalization is not necessarily anti-capitalist in its orientation. Rather, it can be seen as a strategic reversal of privatization, under certain conditions, with the aim of achieving targeted social goals while expanding market-like operational characteristics, such as full cost recovery and financially driven performance indicators to enhance other market functions in the economy.

One example of such a remunicipalization is to be found in Malaysia's

water sector.[32] After a period of privatization, constitutional amendments were made in 2006 which allowed the federal government to seize all assets previously owned by local water operators whether public or private. The intent was to fast-track public investment where the private sector had failed to do so, while at the same time regaining control over a critical resource for regional development planning. The liberalization of water management and distribution was seen to have eroded the ability of Malaysia's de facto one-party state to engage in pro-Malay (*Bumiputera*) development policies for the country's ethnic Malay majority.[33] Hungary provides another example, with the conservative nationalist government of Viktor Orbán introducing a top-down form of remunicipalization in 2010. This move was designed to reverse the post-Soviet privatization binge of the 1990s, based on the argument that private service providers were overcharging citizens.[34] The Hungarian economy as a whole remains largely market oriented but remunicipalized public services have become 'extremely centralised' for the 'national interest'.[35]

There are other examples of autocratic forms of remunicipalization which may offer additional insights, as in Almaty (Kazakhstan), Antalya (Turkey), Bamako (Mali), and Conakry (Guinea).[36] The growth of state capitalisms in general, and the potential for privatization reversals in China in particular, may see these figures rise.[37] A lack of empirical data precludes deeper analysis.

A second category of remunicipalization is *market managerialism*, intentionally aimed at promoting markets and advancing capital accumulation. But in these cases the rationale for putting services back into state hands is more narrowly economistic, intended largely to enhance the efficiency of service provision. Grounded in a neo-Keynesian reading of context-specific market failures – insufficient competition, lack of regulatory capacity on the part of the state – private-sector service delivery is seen to be less efficacious than state delivery and thus a drag on the economy.[38] In these cases, remunicipalization is seen as a necessary, if temporary, measure to reduce operating costs and ensure sufficient investment in services to expand local production and consumption.

As with the arguments of the '*goo goos*' of a century ago, a specific type of government is required to provide these remunicipalized services. The objective here is an entrepreneurial state: one with cost recovery, internal competition and marketized forms of managerial incentives guiding their operation. These forms of remunicipalization can be seen as part of a broader shift towards 'new public management' (and its more recent iterations),[39] resulting in a 'broadening and blurring of the "frontier" between the public and private sectors', combined with a 'shift in value priorities away

from universalism, equity, security and resilience towards efficiency and individualism'.[40] Remunicipalized water services driven by this logic can be characterized as quasi-commercial entities, focusing on market-based performance indicators, a 'preference for more specialized, "lean", "flat" and autonomous organizational forms', and a 'widespread substitution of contract or contract-like relationships for hierarchical relationships'.[41] They may be public in name, but these marketized forms of remunicipalization can serve to deepen, not weaken, the commercialization of public services.[42]

Concerns with marketized forms of remunicipalization are exacerbated by the almost ubiquitous growth of corporatization over the past three decades, notably water and electricity utilities that are owned and operated by the state but function at arm's length from government with separate legal status and ringfenced finances.[43] Not all corporatized water services are commercial in their orientation, but ringfencing does make it easier (even necessary) to focus on the financial bottom line, with utility managers frequently remunerated or incentivized according to the surplus/deficit of their 'business unit'.[44] In some cases, these public water providers are even more commercial than their private counterparts, aggressively pursuing 'surplus' to satisfy their new operational mandates. Critics see this as the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing, offering a façade of public ownership while propagating market ideology.[45]

An example of such a remunicipalization is that of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. After a brief and disastrous experience with a private concession in the water sector in 2003, the World Bank reversed its policy recommendations to the Tanzanian government, promoting instead the creation of a new public water operator in 2005.[46] The Dar es Salaam Water and Sewerage Corporation has since managed to extend coverage and improve some aspects of service delivery – 'proving that public water services can be managed well by the state, and can outperform the private sector in many ways'.[47] But the newly corporatized entity has become much more market-oriented than before, enforcing cost recovery on the poor and 'failing to meet its obligations in the lowest income areas of the city'.

The largest number of market-oriented remunicipalizations have been in the United States, in the very 'heartland of capitalism'.[48] Many of these remunicipalizations are driven by fiscally conscious municipal managers who decide to bring services back in-house simply because it is cheaper to do so by removing the costs of monitoring and tendering as well as eliminating profit-taking by private firms. The corollary to this is that decisions to outsource are equally pragmatic, resulting in pendulum-like swings between public and private service operations depending on which option is cheaper.

Politics plays a part in these remunicipalizations but ideological opposition to privatization is not a primary driver. As Warner and Aldag note: 'We do not find support for remunicipalization [in the United States] as a political project'; it is 'a pragmatic market management project'.[49] Similar types of remunicipalization can be found in Europe.[50]

A third type of remunicipalization can be broadly defined as *social democratic*. These are the most celebrated forms of remunicipalization on the part of NGOs and labour unions and are common in Western Europe and Latin America.[51] In these cases, remunicipalization is seen as an opportunity to challenge the hyper-commodification of privately-run services while promoting public values that go beyond notions of individualized marginal pricing. There is also a push for better horizontal integration of public services and the promotion of public solidarity within and across sectors – including cross-subsidizations – in contradistinction to the ringfencing associated with commercialized forms of public service delivery. These demands are also typically accompanied by calls for new forms of social engagement in public services that promote meaningful citizen participation.

In other words, the social democratic position does not see the push for remunicipalization as a return to a pre-privatization status quo, but rather as an opportunity to upend the bureaucratized, top-down and inequitable forms of public services common in the Keynesian era. Such a shift in governance requires a broad coalition of state and non-governmental actors to enact change (although they remain state-driven), and also comes with further demands for more environmentally sustainable forms of public service provisioning.

The remunicipalization of water services in Paris is the archetype for this perspective, with the introduction of social tariffs aimed at making water services more affordable for low-income households, the promotion of upstream water management with farmers to reduce runoffs into the water supply, and the creation of a 'water observatory' that brings together users, elected officials, researchers and academics in decision making. The Paris plans also came with solidarity programmes for other public water operators in France and elsewhere to promote and improve public water services internationally.[52] Terrassa, Spain, has seen similar initiatives with its remunicipalized water operator.[53]

But as positive as these changes have been, it cannot be forgotten that these social democratic forms of remunicipalization are not explicitly anti-market in their objectives and continue to operate within a broader capitalist framework. Calls for decommodification, for example, require scrutiny. Social democratic service operators can make significant improvements to

equity but they cannot reverse or escape the influence of the commodification process writ large.[54] As a provider of a single service in a single city, a remunicipalized service operator is as much a product of the broader dynamics of commodification as any other public or private company. It can choose to price services in ways that are aimed at meeting social needs, but its overall operations will still be shaped by the exchange values of human and capital resources in a capitalist market economy, with local businesses demanding rates that are competitive with other municipalities.

In other words, the best a social democratic service operator can do is work around the margins of the market. It cannot alter its fundamental mechanisms and should be frank with itself (and its users) about the limits this political orientation places on its ability to change the ways that a local service is shaped by larger global economic forces, particularly when it comes to financing ambitious social, political and environmental objectives.

There are also remunicipalization movements and organizations that are driven by explicitly *anti-capitalist* sentiments. These groups share many of the same goals as their social democratic counterparts – such as improved services and enhanced democratic control – but reject the possibility of a reconciliation between social justice and capitalism, pointing to the many ways in which market economies colonize our broader lifeworlds.[55]

These anti-capitalist voices are not uncommon in remunicipalization movements, but they are seldom in the ascendency, with anti-capitalist protagonists having yet to realize an actual remunicipalization victory in the 21st century. This lack of success is not surprising in a world of neoliberal hegemony, but it is exacerbated by the fact that anti-capitalist voices also tend to be highly fragmented, struggling to find a unified vision of what a 'socialist' service should look like, driven as much by a rejection of old-style communist command economies as they are by opposition to market provisioning of public goods and needs. A growing commitment to grassroots voices, transparent decision making and smaller-scale infrastructure development provides some cohesiveness to this grouping. But as with anti-capitalist political movements more broadly, there is as much that pulls them apart as binds them together when it comes to (re)building public services.

Just how widespread these anti-capitalist positions are when it comes to remunicipalization debates is difficult to say given the dearth of detailed case study evidence. Nevertheless, anti-market voices are particularly evident in European and Latin American remunicipalization movements, with networks such as the European Water Movement and Red Vida encompassing a wide range of radical positions (including that of the next category, autonomism). Former Soviet bloc countries have also witnessed remunicipalization efforts

from new and old socialist voices,[56] and the anti-capitalist academic literature on 'public' services in general continues to grow.[57]

Finally, there are *autonomist* advocates of remunicipalization that are leery of both capitalist and socialist forms of change. There are overlaps here with the other categories (such as demands for equity and environmental sustainability), but this grouping distinguishes itself through its emphasis on community-driven service solutions grounded in a local socio-ecological context with little or no direct state involvement. Water is arguably the most common sector for these voices to be heard, in part because of traditional and artisanal community-led delivery systems, but arguments for autonomy can be found in energy, health and education as well.[58]

Technically these are not remunicipalization movements, per se, because they are generally opposed to centralized and bureaucratized forms of state delivery (regardless of its ideological orientation). But given their commitment to reclaiming and rebuilding publicly controlled and publicly managed forms of services, and the increasing trends towards the co-production of services by state and community organizations, they are an important component of the remunicipalization debate.[59]

Significantly, there are no actual cases of autonomous remunicipalization, although there are many long-standing examples of community-run systems which have never been privatized or municipalized and which are fiercely defended as such.[60] But autonomist voices are present in a variety of remunicipalization movements, fighting to end privatization and reclaim community control. Typically, these groups and individuals work in coalition with other progressive organizations, but as with anti-capitalist remunicipalization voices are seldom the dominant force.

Autonomist voices are most prevalent in remunicipalization networks in Latin America and Europe, where notions of a 'commons' and 'citizen control' are widespread.[61] But reclaiming and rebuilding autonomous service provision has proven difficult in practice, made harder by the highly centralized and institutionalized realities of most contemporary service systems. The very nature of modern networked systems cuts against the horizontal and localized aspirations of autonomous provision, making these goals perhaps the hardest of all to realize in a state-driven world of public services.

A SOCIALIST REMUNICIPALIZATION?

What, then, might a socialist form of remunicipalization look like? The question is a loaded one, given long-standing and intensely contested notions of what socialism means. There are also the inherent limits of what can be

done at the local level. Lenin was right,[62] of course, in highlighting the fact that it is not possible to have socialism in a single city, let alone a single service, and the same limitations apply to remunicipalization today.[63]

It is not my aim to provide a concrete definition of socialist remunicipalization here. The intent is to indicate the possibilities for remunicipalizations that are more explicitly anti-capitalist than the social democratic varieties outlined above, as well as being more democratic and alert to social diversities and ecological crises than were the socialist experiments of the 20th century. World order is also more complex in the intersections of markets, states and ecology than it was a century ago, with capital manifesting itself in ways that are both place-based and global, allowing for multiple points of engagement and resistance, alongside opportunities to develop alternative forms of social provisioning. A remunicipalized service can create substantive change and be part of a larger shift in political consciousness, acting as a wedge to open paths of transformation that challenge market mechanisms and disrupt flows of capital. Socialist remunicipalization is therefore as much the process of extending collective community control as it is the product of service provisioning.

The work of Cumbers and Paul[64] is useful here, arguing that we need to see remunicipalization as part of the conjunctural terrain of the larger contradictions and failures of neoliberalism. As such, remunicipalization is a 'dynamic' phenomenon set within a 'fluid set of political and social relations…which can lead to new configurations and political alliances'.[65] While it would be 'premature to proclaim a new post-neoliberal regime emerging' they argue that remunicipalization 'has the potential to challenge not only neoliberal governance processes but also deeper underlying organic features of capitalist social relations. This is because its emergence illuminates the central contradiction between profit/exchange value on the one hand and use value/basic social needs on the other'.[66]

In other words, socialist forms of remunicipalization cannot be prescribed in advance, will differ from place to place, and must go beyond the constrained social democratic goals that animate many of the progressive remunicipalization debates today. Social democratic reforms are important and necessary transitional demands but they are not an end goal. If stopped at the social democratic stage, these reforms remain entrapped in the contradictions and limits of a marketized public sphere.

In the medium term, socialist forms of remunicipalization must aim to reclaim 'greater democratic control over the production and utilization of surplus value', as per Harvey's arguments for reclaiming the 'right to the city'.[67] In the longer run the objective should be to move the production

and distribution of public services beyond their principal role of facilitating private capital accumulation, while working towards a system of public service provision driven by non-commodified principles, aiming to fulfil use values instead of exchange values.[68]

These transformative changes will not happen overnight. Regardless of how quickly legal and institutional reforms can be put in place in a remunicipalized service, deep-seated functional practices and bureaucratic values are slow to adjust and require continual political effort and activism. The key to building more equitable, democratic and sustainable state-led public services in the medium term is balancing progressive administration with meaningful social engagement. Skilled public sector employees and frontline workers are essential to the reform of public services, but even the most well-intentioned professionals cannot create more egalitarian forms of public services on their own. Nor are social movements yet 'strong enough or sufficiently mobilized to force through this solution', not having 'converged on the singular aim of gaining greater control over the uses of the surplus – let alone over the conditions of its production'.[69] Creating transformative change with public services will require a combination of an effective and progressive state alongside a broad coalition of community, labour, NGO and other non-state actors prepared to demand non-marketized forms of public services 'if the dispossessed are to take back the control which they have for so long been denied'.[70]

There are, of course, cases where working with and within the state is not possible, either because the state is too autocratic or simply non-existent. In these instances, community-led services can and have proven to be an effective substitute to privatization. However, idealized notions of autonomous forms of public services in which all forms of state are rejected in favour of non-hierarchical self-organization can be deeply problematic.[71] Although the general principles of decentralization and local autonomy have been long part of socialist politics, it is essential to frame the energy and creativity of grassroots movements in relation to state structures in the (re) building of meaningful public services. Capturing and remaking states is a daunting task, but much of the anti-state commons literature 'evacuates completely any responsibility to think about how counter-hegemonic projects can contest the dominance of the state and the public realm by neoliberal forces'.[72] This can mean abandoning the most effective tool we have for addressing the social, economic and ecological crises associated with unequal public services. Radical remunicipalization, in other words, is inescapably a project that will be struggled for and disputed on the terrain of the state.

NEW OPENINGS FOR RADICAL REMUNICIPALIZATIONS

Advancing radical forms of remunicipalization will require action on multiple fronts. One is theoretical. An unfortunate outcome of the privatization debate has been the creation of a simplistic binary: private is bad, public is good. As we have seen with the realities of remunicipalization, public can come in many shapes and sizes, some of which are deeply problematic.

Indeed, the very notion of publicness is itself a creation of the market, with nineteenth century capitalists accepting – even demanding – a public sphere that would legitimate the emergence of private interests and yet also facilitate capital accumulation.[73] The limits of this liberal public sphere inherently constrain the potential of radical remunicipalization in a market economy. Recognizing these conceptual and spatial tensions will not resolve the problem, but it does force a theoretical reckoning with the very meaning of what constitutes a (local) public service and highlights the need to go beyond social democratic reforms to explore new practises of democracy and community control.

For activists and progressive policy makers this conceptual reframing requires new tactics and language, different from those employed to fight privatization. Being anti-privatization does not in itself constitute a pro-public vision. Political activism has been remarkably successful at identifying the problems of privatization and instigating remunicipalization, but it does little to help develop concrete alternatives beyond the notion that 'public is better'. Promoting radical forms of remunicipalization therefore requires a distinct set of pro-public arguments that engage with the complex and constantly shifting terrains of a global market economy as well as the equally complex notions of what constitutes 'public'. As Cumbers and Paul note: 'Too often, the left is busy fighting the last war, whilst the right and forces of capital, untroubled by ideological purity, reassemble.'[74]

Activists cannot assume that the same tactics and language of anti-privatization will translate easily to a pro-public movement. There must be a willingness to (strategically) criticize public services to make them better. This need not demonize front-line staff that do their best to provide services in a world of public sector austerity, but it is essential to call out racist, hierarchical or opaque practices and decision making as an essential step towards creating new types of public services that are not mere replicas of some supposed 'golden age' of welfarism. Criticizing public services runs the risk of feeding into a pro-private agenda, but transparent and open self-reflection is essential if we are to develop new discursive terrains.

Nor will the arguments for remunicipalization be as singular and universal as they have been in the fight against privatization. Criticisms of the latter have

been consistent around the world and across sectors. Remunicipalization, by contrast, is about rebuilding entirely new systems, with different priorities in different places. Some communities may demand direct participation in decision making, for example, while others may be unconcerned with such engagement. As such, there are no easy slogans that can bring together advocates of remunicipalization in ways that have been possible in the fight against privatization.

Finding time, energy and resources for a parallel but separate struggle will also be a challenge. The unions, NGOs and community organizations that are at the forefront of the remunicipalization movements also tend to be the ones fighting privatization (and a myriad of other issues) making it difficult to stretch already overextended individuals and organizations.

Research has a role to play here as well. Progressive policy intellectuals have too frequently focused on positive examples of social democratic forms of remunicipalization and celebrated these as examples of why remunicipalization works (the current author included). More research is needed on how these efforts could be more transformative and reach beyond the service in question. We also need to better understand problematic forms of remunicipalization, including 'failed' attempts (instances where efforts to bring services back in house were unsuccessful, or where post-remunicipalization reforms have not produced what policy makers and activists had hoped for).[75] It is difficult to know how many such cases exist, but casting a wider net into new geographic and sectoral terrains could provide insights into impediments to remunicipalization, and new strategies and tactics for activist struggles that can help avoid these problems.

Detailed research and activism in sectors other than water and electricity is also required. Comprehensive and multifaceted assessments of remunicipalizations in health, transport, waste, housing and other essential services are needed to better understand their unique challenges, as well as the synergies they may have with other sectors to help build cross-sectoral modelling. Institutional, financial and cultural norms can differ dramatically from water to health care to waste management, with no guarantee of shared objectives or strategies. Gains in one area can also mean losses in another, requiring a deeper appreciation of how individual remunicipalizations can influence service delivery as a whole, including cross-border impacts between jurisdictions.

There should also be a thematic expansion of research. Studies to date have tended to focus on relatively generic assessments of the social, economic and political dynamics of remunicipalization: for example, are prices more affordable; is decision-making more participatory; and have services

improved? There is a lack of research tackling questions and approaches to equitable provisioning that account for gender, indigeneity, and racialization.[76] For example, what role do women play in remunicipalization struggles? How are racialized communities impacted by the return of services to public hands? Are Indigenous voices being heard in the debates? Do working conditions improve for front-line workers? How these questions relate to efforts to create 'socialist' forms of remunicipalization is a critically important line of inquiry.

Research into energy democracy and local provisioning has demonstrated that well-intended public service reforms can have negative social, economic and cultural outcomes, making it important to disaggregate the benefits from remunicipalization even while insisting on universal access to services irrespective of class and identity.[77] Socialisms that have been blind to these racialized and gendered dynamics are far too common. Efforts to create radical forms of remunicipalization must not fall into the same trap. Working with local communities to build these research capacities and agendas is critical.

None of this is intended to diminish the remarkable accomplishments of the hundreds of struggles against privatization of local services and demands for remunicipalizations of the past 20 years. But it is necessary to highlight the complex institutional and ideological terrains of the state upon which remunicipalizations unfold, and to underscore the need to be alert to the inherent limits placed on all social and economic reforms in capitalist economies. No single act of remunicipalization is going to usher in a socialist era. However, paying attention to the practical and theoretical constraints of being 'public' in a market economy, while setting explicitly non-market goals, can help to advance more radical forms of remunicipalization and contribute to the development of political imaginaries aimed at meeting fundamental human needs.

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