

The Municipalist Tradition in Modern Spanish Politics

Pamela Radcliff

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In the traditional narrative of political modernization in Western Europe, the liberal and then democratic nation state was consolidated as the normative site of citizenship, authority and claims-making. In this narrative, the population evolved from an implicitly primitive local world-view towards integration into the modern nation, propelled by a process of state-led structural integration. Indeed, most of the hegemonic political movements of the 19th and 20th centuries framed the state as the engine of progress, the architect of the nation and the defender of citizens and their liberties. From this perspective, localism and provincialism were obstacles to the forward march of history, quaint relics of pre-modern small-mindedness. Critiques of this top-down model have revealed a more complex ongoing dynamic between local, provincial and national identities and institutions rather than a linear process of amalgamation and consolidation. In particular, a wealth of scholarship on regionalist and provincialist movements has situated them squarely inside the dynamic of political modernity and nation-building.

However, less attention has been paid to the quieter role municipalist movements played in this dynamic, as a consistent counter-weight to the dominant homogenizing and centralizing forces of modern spanish politics. From different ideological positions and in distinct historical contexts, municipalist political movements over the last two centuries have defended an autonomous local political sphere as the core unit of self-governance, community identity and citizen participation. While individual case studies of municipalist movements and platforms exist, the long-term arc of the phenomenon has not been fully acknowledged.

I argue that the municipalist tradition has been an important thread of modern Spanish politics since the war of independence (1808–1814), and that it should be fully incorporated into the historical narrative of modernity. Beginning in the war of independence, municipalist platforms, either implicit or explicit, were a consistent and ongoing feature of the political landscape, from the Progressive Party in the 1830s, to the Federal Republicans in the 1860s, the Anarchists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Citizen Movement of the 1970s and the Municipalist platforms of the 21st century. Without minimizing different contexts and ideologies, for all of these movements the municipality was the site where the community of ordinary citizens and the most proximate governing institutions intersected, providing the natural foundation for self-government. Through citizen participation around the defense of community interests, municipi-

palities would be the building blocks that would in turn connect the local to the larger political unit. There is no question that all of these movements were relative “losers” in the long-term political struggles over the location of authority and decision-making. But the unresolved nature of the tension between local, regional and state-led political projects means that the conflict keeps recurring, with municipalism waxing and waning in relation to competing political currents. The upshot has been an ongoing pattern of municipalist movements and, equally significant, a consolidating narrative of municipalism as an alternative political framework deeply rooted in Spanish history.

So what are we to make of this tradition of municipalist movements over 200 years? Across this period, municipalism has been a recurring language of political renewal and reconstruction in moments of crisis, articulating common themes of decentralization, local autonomy and communitarian participation as core values from which to regenerate political life. The municipalist thread waxed and waned in response to other political forces and vis-à-vis the opportunities provided by liminal transition moments, from the 1830s to 1868, 1931, 1936 or 1978. Notably, they were almost always minority voices in these times of transition, when the dominant political forces focused on the transformation of state power, or to a lesser degree, regional power, but rarely local. Not tied to a specific ideological perspective, municipalist ideas have emerged from across the political spectrum while sharing the conviction that keeping power, authority and decision-making close to citizens’ everyday lives is more likely to result in policies that benefit the community as a whole. In contrast to the autonomous individualism of liberalism and liberal democracy, or the socialist working class, municipalists begin with the geographic community of neighbors and residents as the core unit of the larger polity. In contrast to localism, municipalism usually views local government as a building block or a channel, not an autarchic fortress.

In addition to the common principles that make the case for continuity, it is equally important to understand the specific issues that sparked recurring waves of municipalist enthusiasm, from the sale of common lands in the 1860s to the unregulated construction of the 1960s urban landscape. At the same time that these movements have to be situated in their historical context, it is also striking how invested they often seemed to be in constructing a narrative of continuity that legitimated the current project through historical precedent. From this perspective, the story of municipalism as a consistent thread has been told repeatedly, but almost always from the margins by the movements themselves.

So why is it important to move this narrative from the margins to the center of historical analysis and what are the questions for further investigation? One compelling answer arises from the presentist goal of providing historical context for the current revival of municipalist platforms, including the differences and similarities between this particular moment and previous contexts that favored these ideas. In other words, how does the history of the municipalist tradition shape our understanding of what is happening today? More broadly, acknowledging the municipalist thread as a constituent element of political struggles over the last two centuries further complicates our understanding of the trajectory of modern politics. The questions to pursue from this perspective include the particular contexts in which municipalist discourses have emerged and submerged, and how this process shaped and reflected the configuration of political forces since 1808. Finally, how specific is this thread to modern Spanish politics and if not, what are the points of comparison and contrast with other states? Pushing us ever further away from a linear evolutionary model in which the development of more complex organisms signifies progress, inserting the municipalist thread reveals a dynamic tension about the locus of authority, decision-making

and power that remains unresolved today, yet more evidence that there is no “end of history” in sight.

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