

A Democratic Revolution
Underway in Barcelona:
Barcelona en Comú

JORDI MIR GARCIA

Spain is currently undergoing a political transformation, as three recent elections clearly demonstrate. With the municipal elections of May 24, 2015, various cities, most importantly Madrid and Barcelona, saw the rise to power of new political groups, organized from the ranks of various social activist movements. In the Catalan parliamentary election on September 27, 2015, 48% of Catalonia's electorate voted in favor of the region's independence from the central government. And the general election of December 20, 2015 proved the increasing untenability of Spain's two party system (comprised of the Partido Popular and the PSOE, or Socialist Party), with the emergence of new political entities with unprecedented potential – most notably, the Podemos Party. This paper seeks to outline the changes that have enabled the citizen platform *Barcelona en Comú* (Catalan for “Barcelona in Common”) to win the elections in Barcelona, a victory that signals a rupture in the status quo of Spanish politics. Although the citizen platform Ahora Madrid (“Now Madrid”) did not gain the majority, it did receive the necessary support to have their candidate elected as mayor. Those of us who were closely involved in these recent events may fail to realize just how exceptional and unprecedented our current situation is; thus, taking a step back is useful if only to clarify the conditions in Barcelona that have led us to this point. How could Ada Colau, an activist for housing and human rights, possibly become mayor of Barcelona? What we are seeing is not just about a single individual, however. A more important question might be: How could a political project organized by anti-establishment social activists possibly gain control of Barcelona's government?

THE 15M

In 2011, only 3.9% of the population of Catalonia¹ believed that their democracy worked well and did not require changes; 25.6% expressed the belief that it did not work and required many changes; 16.3% thought it needed a complete overhaul; and 54.2% agreed that it worked well, but required some changes. We had, and still have, a serious problem with our democracy and our forms of governance. Since then, we have witnessed a growth in both the so-called sovereignist process and in the activism following the mobilizations and occupations that began on May 15, 2011.

Two calls-to-action took place in the middle of May, 2011: the 14M and the 15M. Though they shared a common background, and attracted large audiences, the calls did not rally the same people. 14M, organized to protest cut-backs by the Government of Catalonia – under the direction of Convergence and Union (*Convergència i Unió*)² – and was supported by both “majority” and “minority” labor unions – to borrow the mainstream media's distinction. As

JORDI MIR GARCIA is professor of moral and political philosophy, and social movements, in the Humanities Faculty at the *Universitat Pompeu Fabra* in Barcelona. His main research interests are ethics, political thought, the thought of action, and social movements in the contemporary world. As an active citizen he participates in *Barcelona en Comú*. He can be reached at jordi.mir@upf.edu and @llambordes.

1. Roger Soler i Martí, *Democràcia, participació i joventut : una anàlisi de l'Enquesta de participació i política* (Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, 2011), 62. http://benestar.gencat.cat/web/content/documents/arxiu/publicacions/col_aportacions/aportacions_51_epp.pdf

for the 15M demonstrations, no one is exactly sure who had organized them. A couple of names were tossed around, unfamiliar to anyone not already involved in the movement: *Democracia Real Ya!* (“Real Democracy Now!”) and *Juventud Sin Futuro* (“Youth Without a Future”). It was surprising, almost puzzling, that so many people showed up, even if there weren’t as many present as the previous day’s gathering. But something new was happening: a different kind of participant, markedly younger on average, and there weren’t the usual flags and acronyms . . . just as *Democracia Real Ya!* described itself in its manifesto:

We are ordinary people. We are like you: people who get up every morning to study, to work or to look for a job, people who have family and friends. People who work hard every day to live and to provide a better future for those around us. Some of us consider ourselves more progressive, others more conservative. Some of us are believers, some aren't. Some of us have clearly defined ideologies, others consider themselves apolitical . . . But we are all concerned and outraged by the social, political, economic scene before us. By the corruption among politicians, businessmen, and bankers . . . By their rendering the average citizen defenseless. (Democracia Real Ya!, 2011)

15M began in city plazas, public spaces for diverse groups of people sharing similar goals to gather together and reclaim their rights. What made 15M different could be seen in some of the positions it took and the proposals it developed, but truly worth noting was its desire and willingness for collaboration across the board, among a wide range of individuals and political groups. The movement’s success in attracting members over the months that followed was due to the profound simplicity of its platform: what’s not working? The most basic, the most simple, and most profound bases of our society, our democracy, our public institutions, the rules that we have set for ourselves, and the ends that we pursue. Nothing could be more superficial, in the sense of these concepts forming the very surface of our daily lives – and nothing more profound because they compose the foundation of our society. Public health and education are central concerns because they are sharply affected by the politics of austerity: healthcare facilities, operating rooms, and hospitals are being closed; healthcare is becoming less and less accessible. Fiscal cuts in education affect instructors, class size, and tuition rates. With respect to housing, more and more people are finding that they cannot pay their rent or their mortgages. There is a pervasive feeling that our rights and basic necessities are under threat. And amidst all of this, incomprehensible policies, such as the so-called financial bailout, are being pushed forward. At the same time, social movements are beginning to focus on banks such as Bankia or Catalunya Caixa.

The movements we are seeing emerge across Spain, especially those arising in the aftermath of the 15M Plaza occupations – the Plaza de Catalunya in Barcelona, the Puerta del sol in Madrid, etc. – have signaled a turning point in social protest. 15M’s call-to-action is enacting important changes in people who were already mobilizing as well as in those new to activism, but also in the political and economic entities the movement aimed to criticize. The political landscape

2. Convergence and Union is a coalition of two parties: Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (*Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya*, CDC), and the Democratic Union of Catalonia (*Unió Democràtica de Catalunya*). It is the organization that has governed the longest in Catalonia, first with Jordi Pujol (1980–2003) and then with Artur Mas (2011–2016). Now, it has also made way for Carles Puigdemont, the product of an agreement to remain in government despite the change of scene in Catalonia. The movement in favor of independence has also had its effects on the parties. In this case, the federation was split. The Democratic Union was able to get representatives in the last elections, and the CDC joined other parties and independents in favor of the independence movement. CDC and the Democratic Union both attract people who consider themselves on the right or the center.

that emerged after the 15M invigorated activists across the country; it was more pluralistic, broader, richer, more united, more elaborate, and more capable of effecting change. The protests linked to 15M developed without large, rigidly hierarchical organizational structures; rather, they have been characterized by the very opposite. They don't rely on the tactics of political parties or unions. Rather, they include experienced people and make use of new technology that fosters good communication and organization. After all, there's no need for major political infrastructure. These are horizontal movements. The project of the *confluencia*, "convergence" – that is, the growing coalition of disparate political groups and social movements – allows for the consolidation of ideas, plans for action, and calls to rally.

The diversity within the movements also merits attention. The goal was never to homogenize. This period of mobilization has steadily strengthened the organization of various groups and activist entities. Such is the case for *Democracia Real Ya!* or the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, "Mortgage Victims' Platform"), which originated before the 15M, and have more fully developed since the "Occupy" movement. These organizations have taken root in Spain due to the vast reach of their activities. The proliferation of assemblies in different municipalities and neighborhoods, in the hubs of *Democracia Real Ya!* and the *Plataforma de los Afectados por la Hipoteca*, as well as in spaces already devoted to social action, has been key for much of what has since been accomplished. We should have in mind that, with the 15M, nothing has occurred that had not already been in the works. However, given the impact of the events that took place in the streets and in the plazas on May 15, and over the course of the following days, we can consider 15M a turning point not only for new forms of social protest, but also for the highly visible emergence of another way of conducting politics, one that is essential for any pursuit of real democracy. The movements that we witnessed in 2011, and henceforth, share a common denominator in defending rights they believe to be just – the rights not only of individuals, but also of the groups of people that comprise our society and, by extension, the planet. These are rights they feel are under threat by the austerity measures implemented to deal with our current economic crisis – and the economic system that created it. In other words, politicians and markets (bankers, business owners, investors, speculators, etc.) appear to be the main players in an offensive that has society at large as its target.

THE PAH

"[The value of] apartments will never stop rising" was a common mantra during the years of the so-called real estate bubble. Major land developers and representatives of the real estate sector repeated this mantra time and again. There were still people who had difficulties finding a place to live, but we had to understand that things would inevitably remain this way. Let everyone get a mortgage. We know that, while it's highly likely, there is no guarantee the sun will rise tomorrow. It has, every day throughout history, but there is always the possibility that one day, it won't. And one day the sun did not come out as usual. That day, the "crisis" occurred. By then, too many people were already locked into mortgages;

they had finally found a home, but now had to find a way to keep it. They had to be able to pay for what they thought they had acquired. A new mantra began spreading: “you have to pay your debts; no one forced you to get a mortgage.”

Then there emerged *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, “Mortgage Victims’ Platform”).³ Comprised of five people, the group was formed during an assembly on February 22, 2009. Since its inception, the PAH has impacted society on a number of levels. It has managed to accompany and transform the people who get involved in it. The group has negotiated ways out of desperate situations; it has sparked the general support of society; it has passed motions in city councils; it has affected the public agenda; it has, in short, led people to think that, “yes we can, *si se puede*,” achieve what was once thought to be out of reach.

Who had ever heard of “dation in payment” (*dación en pago*) before the PAH started talking about it? Who knew that, unlike their neighboring countries, in Spain, people could not return a property and in turn clear their debt, but instead would lose their homes and still have to continue paying on their mortgages? The PAH exposed situations it considered unjust and needed to be changed, situations about which even those affected might not be fully aware. What would we know about the housing emergency we are in, were it not for the PAH? What would we know about the behavior of financial institutions? Would we know that there can be alternatives to evictions? What about options that exist in other countries? To what extent would we understand the way mortgages worked, or the way legislation was passed in Spain or in Europe?

The PAH has been in the making for a long time. We could say that it emerged out of movements that some had taken to be failures. It arose out of movements for housing rights, such as the one that, in 2007, organized thousands of Spaniards to stand before city halls across the nation and yell simultaneously, “*No tendrás casa en la puta vida*” (“you’ll never have a house in your fucking life”) – movements that, during the years of economic growth, denounced the barriers to basic housing rights, and decried the actions of real estate mobs who were expelling people from their homes to make better money from commercialization. These mobilizations had their repercussions. The public campaigns might have disappeared, but not the will to keep working for housing rights. The housing “crisis” would eventually arrive, and some people believed that the movement should continue, paying even closer attention now to those who felt its effects most acutely and severely. Regardless, in February of 2009, the group consisted of only five members. There was a lot of work ahead of them, and unfortunately few answers issued from either government or financial entities.

While demonstrations have been the most typical form of protest in Spanish society, the PAH has instead focused its efforts elsewhere, seeking alternative methods for stopping evictions, city council motions, protests at the homes of particular individuals (*escraches*),⁴ ILPs (“Popular Legislative Initiatives”) brought to parliament,⁵ and occupation of buildings – actions that have immediate impact. Clearly, the group does not just ask or petition; if they do not achieve their goals at first, they try other means: blocking an eviction,

3. For a more detailed account of the PAH <http://www.raco.cat/index.php/EducacioSocial/article/view/271042/368923>

4. *Escraches* are a type of protest that works to make visible a reality that wants to remain hidden or go unnoticed. The PAH has used *escraches* to try and show the unwillingness of different political representatives to guarantee the right to a living space. A prime example are the initiatives various Argentinean collectives developed to single out those responsible for crimes committed during the dictatorship. <https://cemsenmoviment.wordpress.com/2013/02/08/sobre-escraches-construccion-de-democracia-y-diferentes-tipos-de-violencia/>

5. An ILP is a Popular Legislative Initiative, an instrument allowing citizen proposals to be considered for laws passed by the Congress of Deputies, or by the autonomous Parliaments. The PAH was not able to pass the law that it proposed for the national level, but it was later able to get it passed in the Catalanian Parliament. It was a great success for social activism. Unfortunately, it is a law that has not been upheld the way it should. For more information: <http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/2015/07/25/aprobada-por-unanimidad-la-ilp-contralos-desahucios-y-la-pobreza-energetica/>

organizing an *escrache*, facilitating social work, and offering housing solutions for people in need. For every problem that arises, they seek the most effective solution possible. This is no easy task. Some people believe that the power of the PAH is fueled by the despair of those who have been harmed and are at risk of losing their homes. But we have learned how this situation can also cause vulnerability. Perhaps the PAH's greatest achievement, in the personal realm, has been simply to be with people in the face of their anxieties, fears, pressures, and threats.

The actions of the PAH have illustrated one main idea: legality and legitimacy do not always overlap. The PAH moves in the interstices between legality and illegality, in a space where what is legal can be interrogated and perhaps found illegitimate; a space where that which, according to our institutions, is illegal and illegitimate, might be made legal, because the citizenry wills it to be. And if this legalization does not occur, then non-violent civil disobedience comes into play as a last resort. There is no wish to operate outside of the law; rather, everything is done to find a solution within legal bounds. But, should this prove impossible, there will not be silence or resignation. This situation won't allow for it. For a group of people to violently block a judicial committee from carrying out an eviction is not legal – it is disobedient. To occupy a block of apartments belonging to a financial institution bailed out with public funds is not legal – it is disobedient. But such actions might end up, as they have before, in an agreement with a financial entity to offer public housing. The PAH's civil disobedience has a triple objective: to help people in need, to change what is considered legal, and to attract public attention in order to generate the debate necessary for provoking social change. These three goals underlie the desire to transform our society into a more civil environment. The aim of disobedience is to enable a new form of legality to emerge, one that corresponds to what is understood to be just, legitimate, good, appropriate – better than the system we have now.

The PAH has made the slogan “yes we can, *sí se puede*” popular because it has proven that it can. Perhaps this is the most valuable lesson for people who aspire to bring social, economic, and political injustices to an end. The PAH has provoked us to rethink the bases of our society and to construct new ones in their place. We are now able to truly debate and, humbly, we thank the PAH for landmark achievements. And from within PAH there has emerged an important nucleus of people who have given life to *Barcelona en Comú*, and who now govern Barcelona.

AN ETHICAL-POLITICAL CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT

*We are living in a time of profound changes. Taking advantage of the crisis, economic powers have undertaken an open offensive against the rights and social achievements of the majority of the population. Nevertheless, the yearning for a real democracy is growing ever stronger – not only in the plazas, or the streets, or the internet, but also in the ballot boxes.*⁶

This is the first paragraph of the manifesto with which *Guanyem Barcelona* – later known as *Barcelona en Comú* – introduced itself in June of 2014.

6. <https://barcelonaencomu.cat/es/manifiesto>

The document discussed a radical objective, because it aimed at what members took to be the root of the problem:

Rescuing democracy from the powers holding it hostage is a difficult and ambitious, but at the same time, an exhilarating challenge. It demands the creation of new means for articulating social will and for political intervention where people who are already organized, and those who are just joining the movement can unite; where those who have been fighting for some time, and those who feel conned and now aspire to get involved, can come together for a common cause: Barcelona.⁷

In June of 2014 *Guanyem Barcelona* came onto the scene and all across Spain we witnessed a mass movement to find electable candidates from within like-minded political organizations and from amongst vocal members of the populace. Just as occupations grew in number since those that took place in Madrid and Barcelona, the number of PAH collectives multiplied after the group's rise in Barcelona. The goal was not only to infiltrate local councils and legislations; mayors' seats must be won to truly reverse policies that fail to guarantee basic rights and to begin conducting a different kind of politics.

There are two ideas that tend to guide the endeavors of these citizen-candidates: the current socio-political situation has made this period, historically, the worst period in our lives; accordingly, now is the best time to try something new. The *Guanyem Barcelona's* platform stands out because, among other things, it calls for convergence. The will exists to create a new space where people, regardless of political affiliation, can meet and articulate proposals that respond to what the people of Barcelona, or any other municipality, might want. There is not much tradition, culture, or experience for this initiative, but many see convergence as desirable, necessary, and even indispensable if people truly wish to achieve common goals.

The fact that, behind this type of initiative, we find people and collectives that had never before considered political office is also something unique. These individuals did not comprehend that it was their right. Now this has changed. Government bodies are not an end in themselves, they are a means to achieve important goals. Just one more means, that is, because some of these people have spent significant time in political advocacy, and have become experts in the realm of education, water, energy, housing, social economy, and democratic consolidation. Now they want to continue their work from within government.

From its inception, *Guanyem* has expounded the need to find another way of conducting politics in the current environment of social emergency, which has resulted from the crisis we are experiencing and has been compounded by the responses of the political institutions that are supposed to represent their citizenry. A fundamental way to truly accomplish such a change is by uniting ethics and politics. Thus, one of the first projects was to elaborate a code of ethics. They sought to create a document that outlined the essential principles for a politics that contributes to democracy, not to exploitation by individual or group interests. The ethics upheld by *Guanyem* are those it feels are best for society at large: the recognition and defense of people's rights to a dignified

7. <https://barcelonaencomu.cat/es/manifiesto>

life in which they can participate as empowered and responsible citizens in the decision-making of their community.

Ethics are the reflection, analysis, arguments, and debates on what we consider to be right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, without the need to propose anything concrete. Ethics are the standards by which we judge all that we do individually and collectively. The questions are many, but we must ask them if we do not want to make such issues inaccessible to our citizens. Ethics, like analysis, reflection, and debate, do not offer us unquestionable answers or absolute truths; rather, they encourage us to think, to propose, to reach agreements, to establish criteria based on what we have argued over and agreed upon. In the realm of ethics we should not be looking for easy answers, but for a path for establishing principles for our personal and collective behavior, recognizing that these principles, in open and plural societies, cannot rest on self-evident truths and uncritically received dogmas. Ethics must help us search for shared principles.

Guanyem composed its ethical code accordingly. First, as an exercise for bringing together citizens who stood at different points on the political spectrum, a set of documents were developed as the basis for a possible agreement. The second task was to foster citizens' participation online and in person. Working meetings, the "Governing by Obeying, Ethical Code Consensus Building Conference," was organized and hundreds of people attended the sessions for training, deliberation, and developing proposals. A more specific text was then returned to various constituent groups in order to incorporate proposals that generated consensus online and in the workshops. A majority of citizens eventually ratified the finalized document. The code proposes 25 concrete measures grouped into three areas:⁸ democratization of political representation, auditing and accountability; financing, transparency and expenditure management; and professionalization of politics, the reduction of privileges and measures to tackle corruption. Various groups (the CUP,⁹ Bildu¹⁰ and ANOVA,¹¹ among others)¹² have been proposing similar codes of ethics over the past few years and the issue was in fact central to the platforms of the X Party (Partido X)¹³ and especially (because of its impact) of Podemos¹⁴ in the last European elections. It should be noted, however, that less than 10% of what is laid out in the code is currently being practiced by any group in the municipality of Barcelona.

Guanyem wants to win in order to make this ethical-political change possible within the current model of political representation, and to initiate a change in the way politics function, creating an establishment whose politics arise from ethical commitment and politicians who don't just talk the talk, but walk the walk. It might not be simple, or quick, to find the paths that can lead us to paradise, but there is a desire to clearly point out those routes that lead us to hell so that we no longer follow them.

8. <https://barcelonaencomu.cat/es/gobernar-obedeciendo-codigo-de-etica-politica>

9. The Candidacy of Popular Unity (Unitat Popular, CUP) is focused on municipal level elections in Catalonia and, since 2012, has been in the Catalanian Parliament. They represent sectors of the left, and those in favor of independence. They seek social and national rupture.

10. Bildu is a political and electoral project that shares similar characteristics with the CUP, but is more specifically involved in Basque politics (Euskadi). The Basque political scene is unique for having to deal with various injunctions against certain political parties for their supposed relationships with the armed organization ETA. Consequently, new groups bearing different names but sharing similar goals have arisen to be the political instrument of the Basque party for independence within the government.

11. ANOVA is a political organization that shares similar characteristics with the CUP and Bildu, but is located in Galicia. It emerged as a new venue formed by people coming from other organizations, or who are returning to politics.

12. It is not random that these political options, sharing similar characteristics, but developed in different Autonomous Communities, share the need to rethink the relationship between ethics and politics. All of them point to the need to make democracy possible, arguing that it has truly yet to exist.

13. The X Party is a political organization that emerged with its eyes on the 2013 elections for the European Parliament. Nevertheless, it already had a previous run, and it will continue in the search for a democratization of society and its institutions. The organization ties in 15M affiliates and other related groups and operates most effectively through networking and technology.

14. Podemos is also a new political project that emerged in the heat of the socio-political changes brought about by 15M before the elections for European Parliament in 2013. It had great popular support, as proved in the elections to the European Parliament in 2013. Subsequently, it started to grow as an alternative to the bipartisan system of the two largest parties (PP and PSOE).

Let us try to be a bit more concrete. The ethical code articulates a series of practices and actions that *Guanyem* members holding political office, whether elected or freely appointed, must fulfill. *Guanyem* members in government commit to implementing the ways and means for these ethical principles to become obligatory norms for everyone in municipal administration. This ethical code should be flexible, dynamic, and concise. An important part of it is centered on people's behavior. The assumption underlying these proposals is that the systemic corruption revealed over the last few years is a perverse effect of a deficient democracy. Further, in being a poor democracy, it can only be cured with more, and better, democracy – in both the political and economic senses – and must encourage civic participation that is popular, real, and not merely rhetorical. It must discover ways of producing and distributing more cooperative, egalitarian, and sustainable resources. Authentic political regeneration requires the involvement of serious and honorable women and men. But this cannot depend solely on personal virtues. Necessary, as well, are judicial guarantees and citizen checks and balances: for even the most exemplary of people, once in power, should be supervised and regulated to ensure that they are governing by obeying and doing so in the service of the majority. The organization will work on a set of procedures that consolidate and put the principles of the ethical code into action.

Through the code of ethics, *Guanyem* seeks commitment on the part of elected officials to the guidelines laid out for them. Such can be said to occur when representatives duly carry out the decisions that issue from democratic processes that are open to all, promoting political responsibility for both voters and elected officials. Moreover, agendas, meeting minutes, and daily proceedings must be made public so that people can know with whom their representatives are meeting and in regards to what.

The recruitment criteria for discretionary appointments will also be made public. The proceedings must be made accessible to citizens through face-to-face and virtual means that are democratic and open to people from any sector or zone (city, neighborhood, or district). The information should always be presented through an accessible online format, allowing it to be commented upon and edited. Included in the criteria, too, will be the standard procedure for censuring and, if necessary, firing, freely appointed officials who grossly mismanage or flagrantly fail to implement the collectively elaborated program. In order to make this possible, quality mechanisms will be established to evaluate the performance of the people holding public office, and the citizenry will have the right, and the duty, to actively participate in the monitoring of public officials' duties so as to guarantee a just and honest application of this principle. Duties will be terminated immediately if the judiciary finds an official guilty of crimes related to corruption, furthering of interests for private gain, influence peddling, profiting from public or private funds, bribery, embezzlement, or the acquisition of public funds for the benefit of oneself or a third party. Officials will likewise be removed if the judiciary finds them guilty of crimes dealing with racism, xenophobia, gender violence, homophobia, and other infractions against human rights or labor rights.

Those who hold elected, administrative, or freely appointed posts will com-

mit to the following: renouncing the gifts and privileges that may be offered to them because of their position, and which might signify preferential treatment; not holding multiple positions in government with the exception of those related to their status as councilmen or council women; not receiving multiple salaries or charging remunerations for attending gatherings; establishing a maximum net monthly pay of 2,200 euros, including per diems (accepting that this compensation guarantees dignified conditions to exercise the responsibilities and duties that are expected of the post assumed); limiting their mandate to two consecutive legislative sessions, which can be extended by one term if agreed upon after discussion and validation by the citizenry; an expedient transfer of information and knowledge (without remuneration); following a protocol agreed upon during the campaign; not taking, for a period of at least 5 years, positions of responsibility in companies created, regulated, supervised by, or that have been beneficiaries of a municipal contract, within the sector and/or industry where the person has had a representative role – in no event will they be able to hold positions on these companies' administrative boards; making public all income, assets, returns on equity, and any other data needed to detect potential conflicts of interest; and the creation of a citizens' audit. This commitment will be in effect for 3 years after the person has already left their public post.

To ensure that government representation galvanizes citizens whose political participation has not seen much development since the end of the Francoist regime, the population must be included in the decision-making and the political positioning of their representatives with respect to strategic issues and projects that have social, environmental, and urban impact in their city, district, or neighborhood – taking into account the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. Everyone who occupies an elected or appointed position must be committed to pushing through and supporting all of the citizen initiatives proposed within the existing legal framework (at the scale of the neighborhood, district, or city), and must especially commit to maintaining a close relationship with vulnerable groups, guaranteeing a place in their agendas to hear them and respond to their proposals. Upon voting, they must keep in mind the reports provided by members of the administration who work closely with these groups.

CONSTRUCTING DEMOCRACY WITH EACH STEP

Guanyem Barcelona has made agreements with Equo,¹⁵ Esquerra Unidai Alternativa (EUiA),¹⁶ Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds,¹⁷ Podemos and Procés Constituent.¹⁸ Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that this convergence is civic rather than partisan. Convergence does require some agreement among the parties involved, but more than that, it requires working side-by-side on a daily basis. The point of this political convergence is to bring together, within government, the very people who had been questioning government policy, but from outside the structures of power.

Guanyem Barcelona holds its goals and the methods for achieving those goals in equal esteem. This basic concept not only informs their analyses and ethical debates, but also the ways the movement organizes. After receiving more

15. Equo is a political project that emerged in 2010 from different collectives and individuals who defend sustainability, participatory democracy, social justice, equality, and human rights.

16. EUiA is the section of Izquierda Unidad (United Left), the party left of the PSOE, in Catalonia. At the national level it was consolidated in the 80s through the coming together of different parties and collectives of the alternative left: communists, pacifists, ecologists (etc.).

17. ICV was the United Left section in Catalonia for many years until there was a split within it and the EUiA emerged. It is a party that originated in the PSUC, a communist party that opened itself up to feminism, pacifism, and ecologism.

18. Procés Constituent is a citizen project presented in 2013, with the initiative of some political collectives, that emerged with the desire to promote a different political, economic, and social model. It is anti-capitalist and is a partisan of independence for Catalonia.

than 30,000 signatures supporting the first manifesto, *Guanyem* began a process that seems destined to land them victories in the next municipal elections. This process is inevitably comprised of many stages. Those lying ahead of us will largely be determined by the political convergence, by the preparation of the electoral campaign, and by life after elections. It is hard to say how things will turn out; whatever happens must necessarily result in the building and deepening of democracy, as we have stated here.

Currently, *Guanyem Barcelona* is organized into neighborhood groups, committees, an executive council, and a plenary. The neighborhood groups are *Guanyem*'s own spaces, where anyone who wants to be part of the proposal for convergence can participate in his or her personal capacity. These groups are organized as open, self-managed assemblies, though their duties and their ability to make decisions are limited. They must attend to the reality and the social fabric of the territory where they operate. The *Coordinadora de Barrios* ("neighborhood coordination"), which includes two people from each neighborhood group, forms those groups' link with, and representation within, the other branches of *Guanyem*. These spaces welcome and foment the participation of individuals who want to advocate for a proposal in their neighborhood. Advocates assess the well being of their neighborhoods; foster spaces for exchanging opinions and developing proposals out of them; network with different neighborhood stakeholders whose knowledge and experience with the neighborhood can contribute to their assessment, while respecting stakeholder autonomy. The neighborhood groups participate in the plenary, and they coordinate with the Content Commission.

The committees are where *Guanyem*'s essential, day-to-day work gets done. Each committee determines its number of participants, its profile, and its internal organization (subcommittees, tasks, working groups, etc.). Two people from each committee have general oversight, and all members can attend the plenaries. To be sure, these are the bodies that have grown most easily, and that bring together the greatest number of people and neighborhood groups. Currently there are five active committees: the Content and Accounts Committee, which coordinates the creation and execution of key concepts and the development of *Guanyem*'s content and mission (this committee is the largest; it has developed an extensive list of themes, which have gradually been multiplying as hundreds of people have participated); the Communications Committee, which promotes, executes, and plans *Guanyem*'s communication (its specific responsibilities include the website and its server, graphic design, social networks, the press, videos, streaming, mailing, editing, and translating); the Logistics and Finance Committee, which gives logistical support to the different actors in *Guanyem* and, in addition to securing funding, carries out the general administrative and economic management; the Committee of Convergence with Political Forces, which has established contacts with different political forces with which *Guanyem* wants to converge and work; the Organization Committee, which is formed by three subcommittees – the territorial (in charge of coordinating *Guanyem*'s expansion into districts and neighborhoods), collaborators (in charge of contacting people who would like to collaborate with *Guanyem*,

facilitating their incorporation into the project), and internal organization (in charge of elaborating operating protocols and the development of the organizational structure for different phases of the project).

An executive council oversees *Guanyem*'s entire process (strategy, action plan, general calendar, analysis of current events, etc.), and coordinates the different aspects of the organizational structure. It consists of *Guanyem*'s spokespersons and their support teams, two people from each committee, two people from the neighborhood coordination councils, and others on specific working groups who are often asked to address timely issues. One or two people also take care of secretarial work. The executive council meets each week and requires very little rotation to keep it functional. Urgent and operative decisions are made in the group, and they identify decisions that must be made in the Plenary. Together with an action team, the executive council ensures that the Plenary runs smoothly (putting together the agenda for the day, organizing its operations, etc.).

The Plenary, the heart of the organization, is the space where the most important issues are articulated and decided upon, where mandates are generated and where accountability is anchored. It is a space that is clearly evolving in tandem with the growth of the movement. In its first phase, the Plenary was an assembly place for anyone involved in launching *Guanyem*, and those who later joined the movement. After a general organizational structure was established, it was agreed upon that the Plenary should serve as the gathering space for those who participated in committees, neighborhood groups, and the executive group. It is possible that, in the future, participation will be limited to a maximum number of people from committees and neighborhood coordinators in order to make individual sessions more operative and viable. The Plenary meets weekly or biweekly, depending on the activities it has on the agenda. The group intends to use assemblies to extend decision-making to all who participate in *Guanyem* on issues such as validating and agreeing upon convergence with other groups.

Guanyem is an ongoing project that is constantly developing. It is a project that has at its base a solid proposal, but whose organization is still being developed. We can assume this development will generate growth, convergence, and the need to constantly think and re-think the organization. The Organization Committee works in the short, medium, and long term to obtain a kind of organization that corresponds to the quality of democracy that is sought. The means and the ends cannot be contradictory.

It was agreed upon that the electoral list would be decided during the primaries, when people could vote for a leader, their team, and territorial representatives who would run individually from each district. Thus far, the only list presented to the primaries is the one led by Ada Colau and 37 individuals running for district posts.

From its inception, the movement has sought to foment democracy one step at a time. It sought to win the elections, while knowing that such a feat was not enough to genuinely change anything. The work done to maintain the internal organization of *Barcelona en Comú* would face a serious challenge if the elec-

tions were won and the group agreed to govern. The pressure would be intense; elected officials would constantly need to make decisions on the spot. Will it be possible to uphold the same level of democracy and transparency achieved until now? The viability of the project will depend, in great measure, on the answer to this question.

MAKING ANOTHER CITY POSSIBLE

From the beginning, *Guanyem* has focused on developing its central tenets and concerns. Through a series of analyses, debates, and proposals, the movement was then able to articulate its stances on various issues. Once the initial convergence was established, the group created a list of measures to be taken should *Guanyem* win the election for mayor. Titled the “Emergency Plan for the First Months of the Mandate,” the document states that:

*Barcelona has enough resources to confront inequalities, and to become a model for what it means to live well, together, with respect for others and the environment. To best use these resources, we need a courageous and credible government – capable of confronting powerful groups that place their individual interests over those of the majority – and to value the collective intelligence of the people and their neighborhoods.*¹⁹

The plan is structured around four basic lines of action: first, to create dignified work and diversify the model of production; second, to guarantee basic social rights; third, to reverse the privatizations and the projects that go against the general welfare; and forth, to audit the city government and to eliminate existing privileges. This is not the whole of the electoral program, nor does it touch upon all of the areas of concern. For example, it does not mention education, but this in no way means education does not matter to the movement. The plan is something of a declaration of programmatic principles with regard to the policies that will be developed. The entirety of the work carried out until now, beyond the “Emergency Plan,” can be seen in the documents developed by different focus groups.

The plan’s first line of action is devoted to the creation of jobs, and is focused on the model of production. About 100,000 residents of Barcelona are unemployed, half of whom are long-term unemployed, and about half of whom receive no assistance. More than 40% of youth are without work, and 15% of those who are employed live on poverty wages. *Barcelona en Comú* claims that economic activity must be diversified, and that the model of production should be reoriented to be more socially just and environmentally sound. The way to accomplish this goal would be to start off with a training program, and to indirectly create sustainable jobs by renovating homes to be more ecologically sound; ensuring preventive and sustainable waste management; creating commercial networks centered on geographic proximity; caring for and supporting people – especially children, the elderly, and those who are handicapped – and promoting cooperative and technologically up-to-date economies. One of the program’s primary objectives is to create 2,500 jobs, which requires an invest-

19. <https://barcelonaencomu.cat/es/plan-de-choque-para-los-primeros-meses-de-mandato>

ment of 50 million euros.

This first line of action will also aim to create means by which to ensure the quality of municipal contracts. The objective is to use all mechanisms at the municipalities' disposal to guarantee basic workers' rights, both for the municipal and contracted workers. To make this possible, they will need to review the terms of existing contracts. Incorporated into the terms of every new contract of the municipality will be the guarantee that workers' rights, and basic environmental rights, be respected. In addition, in collaboration with the labor inspectorate, and in dialogue with the different unions and employers' associations, greater protections will be put in place for employees of companies located in the municipality.

The second line of action seeks to guarantee basic social rights. One of its crucial tenets is allocating as much of the municipality's resources as possible to help eliminate financially motivated evictions, and guarantee a dignified resettlement for those forced into such a situation. It is anticipated that an investment of 50 million euros would be required for the plan. *Barcelona en Comú* wants to guarantee the right to food year-round for all children and adolescents living below the poverty line. They understand the right to food as a basic right for the entire population. In 2013, 2,865 children in Barcelona suffered from malnutrition. Between 2014 and 2015, 4,639 applications for grants for food were kept out of official government statistics. An initial investment of 20 million euros will be allocated toward the measure. It is estimated that 10% of families in Barcelona, about 80,000 people, suffer from energy insecurity. They are unable to pay their light, water, and gas bills on a regular basis. This reality contrasts with the exorbitant profits made by utility companies, and speaks to the lack of public policies that might resolve this situation. A dialogue with utility companies will be held to help negotiate guaranteed access to basic provisions. There will be interventions in every domain. For example, fairer water fees will be decided upon, and research will be conducted to find ways to make it public again. A fund of 5 million euros will also be created to cover the most urgent cases for energy assistance. To guarantee the right to health, an agreement will be made with the city council of Barcelona to pressure the *Gobierno de la Generalitat* to reverse current policies. There will be campaigns to assist the most vulnerable individuals in primary care centers and hospitals. The *Generalitat de Catalunya* should cover the public costs; however, a fund of 5 million euros will be established to finance these measures. The basic right to sustainable transportation for reasons of social cohesion or health will also be protected and guaranteed. The group will also work to revise tax rates that have been acutely harmful to the middle class and, especially, to the poor. In the last few years, a period of increasing poverty, these rates have exceeded 20%. In a city where one in five children is living in poverty, and where 5,000 people were excluded from the Minimum Insertion Income (RMI) in 2014, a proposal needs to be made for a municipal benefit for all families under the poverty line so that their income can reach 60% of the city's average (about 570 euros). The organization will also attempt to establish a guaranteed basic income in Catalonia. To launch this policy, an initial investment of 25 million euros is expected.

The third line of action is directed toward reviewing and reversing privatiza-

tions and projects that undermine the general welfare. The group will search for new ways of building public-cooperative-community partnerships. It will also declare an immediate moratorium on the opening of tourist hotels and apartments until an audit, under citizen oversight, is completed and a tourism plan for the entire city is developed. There are also plans to curtail the participation of the city council in private business projects; to suspend the expansion of large commercial centers; to discontinue or revise the processes of privatization or outsourcing that harm the general welfare, such as those affecting daycares, and parking lots that already exist, or which are being proposed by the Institute of Parks and Gardens; and to investigate and discuss the conditions of questionable concessions to private firms.

The fourth line of action of this emergency plan would be wiping the slate clean: getting rid of the existing entitlements, and starting from scratch. An emergency plan like the one presented demands an audit of the current state of the government and inherited municipal debts, putting an end to the unethical practices, and creating institutions that are more relevant for the citizenry and that are more efficient in resolving the concrete problems affecting residents of Barcelona. The population must get actively involved in supervising the plan's execution, making use of and reinforcing formal and informal spaces for political and social participation. Other goals are to reduce the salaries of council members and people in other high government posts; to eliminate official cars, and do away with unfair allowances; to start an audit of the main public bodies that promote economic and social well-being and to reinforce the role of social entities; to revise unnecessary spending in the context of social emergency (such as the millions of euros conferred to the *Circuito de Catalunya en Montmeló*); to revise and extend the participatory spaces that foster this plan's execution in every district – these spaces will offer technical and skilled-work training programs for their members.

Barcelona en Comú believes that the 160 million euros it would cost to implement this plan represents only a modest part of the budget that has already been decided upon in the municipality of Barcelona for 2015. This quantity could be obtained just by redirecting current priorities for investment and expenditure. When it comes to investing in social welfare projects, the government of CiU is frugal. Still, it dedicates an amount that *Barcelona en Comú* considers excessive for maintaining its own administration, publicity, or economic sectors that are bloated and unsustainable. The analysis of the municipal budget shows that the allotment for expansion of road construction was 139.4 million euros, far beyond that of other allotments, such as the 10.1 million invested in housing, or the 19.1 million in social investments. Of the 15 neighborhoods with the lowest incomes, 11 have received investments that fall below the city's average. The cost of the investments in luxury roads is 16 million, which is far more than the 6.3 million spent on rehabilitation, or the 4.8 million allocated for constructing new daycares. At the time of this text's submission, a participatory process to create the electoral program was still underway.

FINAL NOTE

Barcelona en Comú has come to power without a majority, and it needs to form alliances with other forces in order to be able to advance its policies. It is too soon to estimate what the consequences will be. Currently, they are looking for a way to form a coalition government, but doing so will not be easy. For now, advances are made step by step alongside political parties which share specific and targeted goals. It is noteworthy that the plenary of the municipality voted against one of the first symbolic proposals of *Barcelona en Comú*: a salary cut for elected representatives. The councilors of *Barcelona en Comú*, including the mayor, have greatly reduced their own salaries, but not as a result of changes in the law. They receive the traditional salary, but put a large part of it toward social projects.

At the time of this text's completion, it has only been seven months since the new government was elected. It is too early to analyze the policies developed or their future effects. There will be other occasions for that. Yet, one can clearly see that the government is prioritizing its commitment to the most vulnerable sectors of society through increased spending on social welfare. The government has upheld its decision to end evictions and negotiate with owners of properties that could be used for alternative housing. It is also important to analyze how these policies have been carried out: appointments, bids, internal competition, transparency, participation, etc. The group will face many challenges in the legislature, some of which have already arisen – consider the pressure and hostility from sections of the elite who do not necessarily share their political opinions. It would be unfortunate if, ultimately, *Barcelona en Comú* effectively reinforces the impediments to democracy that it had wished to break – broken promises, failure to reach agreements, or acceptance of the traditional political practices that they had sought to overturn. No one ever said that a democratic revolution was easy. Many people didn't even think that the elections could be won. This is the opportunity that multiple generations have been waiting for, so that they can say that democracy exists, that it is the people who govern.

Translated by Diego Arrocha, Johnathan Vaknin, and Leah Leone

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Mir Garcia, Jordi "A Democratic Revolution Underway in Barcelona: *Barcelona en Comú*." *Near Futures Online* 1 "Europe at a Crossroads" (March 2016): nearfuturesonline.org/the-end-of-the-european-left-social-democracy-hope-disillusion-and-europe/