



7 STEPS TO BUILD A DEMOCRATIC ECONOMY

The Future is Public Conference Report



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This report is based on the panels, workshops and discussions of the international Future is Public: Democratic Ownership of the Economy conference that took place on 4-5 December, 2019 in Amsterdam's South-East borough, the Bijlmermeer.

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1. BACK TO THE FUTURE

Under the grip of an increasingly emboldened right-wing nationalism, our world is in turmoil. From India to Turkey, Brazil to the US, a series of dangerous populists have come to power on a racist, climate-denying and crony capitalist agenda.

The timing could not be worse. Ecological breakdown looms imminent. Global inequalities are sharper than ever. Decades of neoliberalism have torn apart our social fabric, leaving countless people across global North and South struggling to access the basics of survival amidst widespread privatisation and the marketisation of everything under the sun. Indeed, it is these crises of capitalism that have empowered the far right, who have turned desperation into division in order to ensure that the position of the wealthy and powerful is perpetuated.

Yet, in spite of all this, something else is happening. Simultaneously, social movements and governments across the world have begun to quietly build a different future. A public future grounded in solidarity, equality, sustainability and radical democracy.

At the heart of this new public future stand towns and cities. New research from TNI and international partners shows that between 2000 and 2019, globally, there have been over 1400 new cases of “municipalisation” or “remunicipalisation” -- the creation of new public enterprises run by the local governments or the return of privatised enterprises to municipal hands. This trend has taken place across 2400 locales in 58 countries. Workers and their unions have often been at the heart of these remunicipalisation efforts, striving to improve workplace conditions while endeavouring to place their valuable knowledge and experience at the centre of public services.

This “new municipalism” has not emerged in isolation. Rather, it arises in a broader agenda of economic democracy pursued across a range of scales including but not limited to the city. From the workers co-operative that has taken over cleaning services in Recoleta, Chile through to the suite of nationalisations recently proposed by the British Labour Party, new forms of public and collective



ownership are being developed in our workplaces, our neighbourhoods, our towns, our cities, our countries, our world.

Why now? Why, after years of being told that there is no alternative to capitalism, is public ownership back on the table? What changed to make this possible? While there are surely many factors at play here, perhaps the most clear-cut is that privatisation now stands more discredited than ever before.

While we were initially sold privatisation on the basis of its “efficiency”, study after study has found little evidence that private ownership is inherently more efficient than public ownership. What we have seen, instead, are increasing costs and declining quality for service users, worsening conditions for workers and a total breakdown of democratic accountability, transparency and control. The myth that “private is better and cheaper” can no longer be sustained. It’s little wonder, then, that people are demanding change and that especially local governments are starting to act.

If the future is public, what will this look like and how will it be built? This was the question animating the international conference on 4-5 December 2019 convened by The Transnational Institute, De 99 Van Amsterdam (the city’s new think and do-thank) and international partner organisations. For two days, activists, researchers, trade unionists, politicians and policymakers from across the world gathered to share experiences, build solidarity and further plans for economic democracy. This report provides a brief snapshot into some of the discussions that took place. While unfortunately not everything could be captured, the hope is that

a number of the key questions, tensions and ideas are recorded here, as a basis for further debate. The report identifies 7 steps that are vital to build a democratic economy, which emerged out of the discussions in Amsterdam. Each of these is addressed in the pages that follow.

The conference was hosted in the vibrant and diverse Bijlmermeer neighbourhood of Southeast Amsterdam, a place with an important history of struggle that resonated throughout our discussions. As a neighbourhood rich in a multitude of different migrant communities, subject to ongoing racist criminalisation and chronic underinvestment, Bijlmermeer is on the frontline of the processes of gentrification and racial injustice that any new public future must resist. Defending the right to housing and education is a particular challenge for the people of Bijlmermeer, who over the past ten years have organised collectively to win significant improvements in this regard. From an opening welcome from Tanja Jadnanansing, the Chairperson of the Executive Board of Amsterdam's Southeast borough, to a crucial intervention on the history of black struggle in the Netherlands and beyond from Mitchell Esajas of the Amsterdam-based Black Archives, our international gathering endeavoured to remain rooted in the specific struggles of the place in which we met.



2. THE NEW MUNICIPALISM

With the majority of the world's population now living in urban areas, the city has emerged as a vital terrain of social struggle. As the conference's keynote lecture from renowned Marxist geographer David Harvey made clear, cities are key arenas for wealth generation and capitalist accumulation. If, as Harvey suggests, the perennial dilemma for the capitalist is where to profitably invest the surplus capital they extract, then the urban environment provides ample opportunities for doing so -- from large infrastructure projects to the stimulation of new forms of ever-more spectacular consumption.

Yet cities, Harvey noted, are not just vehicles for accumulation but also sites of resistance -- a notion that seems particularly prescient in the current conjecture. National politics in much of the world have for years appeared to be drifting more and more to the right. But meanwhile, municipalities and urban movements have increasingly made cities spaces of social innovation and emancipatory experimentation. Spaces where policies can take root that uphold and advance the interests of local communities and the environment.

Perhaps the most widely celebrated example in this regard is Barcelona. Since May 2015, the Catalan capital has been governed by a new "citizen's platform" named Barcelona En Comú, led by the housing activist Ada Colau. Barcelona En Comú seeks to feminise politics¹ by transforming the local state into a vehicle for expanding grassroots democracy and participation and to undo privatisation through forms of municipal ownership that give citizens maximal control over the services they use. Achievements so far have included measures to curb gentrification and evictions, the remunicipalisation of gender violence prevention services and three kindergartens and the establishment of new municipal entities for dental services, funeral services and electricity retailing (the latter of which is discussed in section 5).

1 Feminisation of politics, beyond its concern for increasing presence of women in decision-making spaces and implementing public policies to promote gender equality, is about changing the way politics is done. A feminised politics seeks to emphasize the importance of the small, the relational, the everyday, challenging the artificial division between the personal and the political. Source: <https://roarmag.org/magazine/municipalism-feminization-urban-politics/> written by Laura Roth and Kate Shea Baird

Barcelona is perhaps the most high-profile example of a broader tendency evident in many struggles across the world towards radically democratic urban politics. This movement often referred to as “new municipalism” extends far beyond Spain. Vienna, Austria, is another impressive example of the kinds of gains made possible through progressive municipal politics. This is a city famous for its quality-of-life, ranked for a decade in the top 10 cities in this regard. For Renate Brauner, Special Representative of the City of Vienna, this high quality of life is achieved on the back of publicly owned and managed services and infrastructure including housing, waste management, education, energy and transport. 60% of the city’s residents live in publicly owned or subsidised housing -- not because two thirds of the city are poor, but because housing here is seen as social good, not a market commodity. On the European level, the Housing for All initiative unites tenant associations, trade unions, human rights organisations, church groups and pensioners, among others to collect more than one million signatures. This European Citizens’ Initiative urges the European Union to take action that enables affordable housing for all.

Remunicipalisation policies targeting the likes of water, energy and waste management are often at the centre of new municipalist initiatives. Norway provides an interesting recent case of remunicipalisation. In September 2017, one of the country’s biggest waste collection companies, RenoNorden,

declared bankruptcy. Since then, the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees (Fagforbundet) has won the remunicipalisation of waste services in more than 100 municipalities across the country. The benefits have been widespread. For instance, in the case of Kragerø, the first municipality to take back its waste services, fees for residents have been reduced by 14% while waste collection workers are enjoying higher wages and pensions alongside more permanent contracts and support in gaining official diplomas for their skills. Costs for the municipality, meanwhile, have been decreased through avoiding expensive tendering processes while municipalities have rebuilt their internal capacity to ensure quality service delivery.

Service continuation during a transition from private to public is a critical priority given that public services must continue to be delivered throughout the remunicipalisation process. The Global Union Federation Public Services International members argue that reciprocal links between national federations and their local branches are critically important at a time of change. This was also the case in Norway. Here, the national head office and local branch teamed up to persuade city councils in the affected municipalities to vote against tender renewal, and instead to bring waste services back in house. The Fagforbundet local union in Oslo also turned a private-to-public transition into an opportunity to increase its membership, recruiting



workers from the private company, many of whom were migrants and had temporary contacts prior to remunicipalisation and supported the non-union workers too. Experiences in Norway illustrate the importance of grassroots activism by workers -- in this instance on the part of local union branches and shop stewards -- in pushing municipalities to act.

As inspiring as these examples might be, many conference participants from countries of the global South suggested that the municipalist agenda is Eurocentric and the relative development of states, institutions, and governance structures around the world is under-appreciated and under-analysed. For one thing, many of the more celebrated examples of new municipalism tend to be from the global North, despite years of democratic innovation across the global South, for example Porto Alegre's development of participatory budgeting and the Zapatista's self-governed territories in Chiapas, Mexico. The role of theory and practice developed in the global South must be better acknowledged in the municipalist movement going forward, as well as a diversity of tactics, strategies, and ownership forms.

Indeed, strong municipal initiatives continue across the global South. The case of Recoleta, Chile discussed in section 4 is one strong example. Southeast Asia has also witnessed a number of important remunicipalisations. For instance, Selangor, Malaysia recently remunicipalised its water system after two decades of conflict. Following privatisation in 1994, the quality and stability of service provision declined, including regular outages in the summer and the normalisation of water rationing for 10 million residents. Meanwhile, overcharging, missed targets and the non-disclosure of crucial information became commonplace. Various attempts to terminate the city's contract with private provider SYABAS were made, culminating in 2014 when a new public operator was established and acquired the concession. Subsequently it invested over €237 million between 2016 and 2018 to upgrade and maintain the system.

Binalonan in the Pangasinan province of the Philippines is another hotbed of municipal action. Here, the municipality provides free primary

healthcare, daycare centres, support for single parents and older people and financial assistance for women and children. As a result, it experiences significant health advantages, for example a 2016 chronic malnutrition rate among children aged 0-2 of 9.06%, compared to the national average of 26.2%. The municipality of Cainta, Rizal is another example in the Philippines, establishing the One Cainta College to bring free tertiary education and lifetime opportunities for study to low income households, alongside ambitious investment in upgrading hospitals and opening new health centres.

Despite these municipal successes across the global South, conference participants also stressed that postcolonial states are often highly centralised, affording local government little autonomy and often seeing municipal politics dominated by local elites. As such, for Wol-San Liem, Director of International Affairs for the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union, municipalities in several countries are more frequently antagonistic targets for people and local community rather than allies.

This latter point holds true for struggles against water privatisation in Lagos, Nigeria. In 2014, activists in Lagos learned of plans on the part of the local government to enter into a public-private-partnership designed by the International Finance Corporation arm of the World Bank, around the city's water supply. In response, the NGO Environmental Rights Action launched the "Our Water Our Right" campaign, which soon made strong links with AUPCTRE, the trade union representing workers in the water sector. The campaign forced the IFC out, yet the government continued to plan for privatisation, challenging activists to produce an alternative solution for the failing state water company. In response, an alternative roadmap to democratise the state water company and transform this into a citizen-led publicly owned water utility was developed, which provides the basis of ongoing struggle.

In Lagos, while the institutions of the local government are being used to force through harmful anti-democratic policies, we also see the importance of struggles waged around urban infrastructure such as water networks. This

experience helps us clarify productive ways to re-think municipalism. The initial architects of the municipalist project in Barcelona were always clear that the point was not to fetishise electoral power or the local state. Instead, the idea was to use a flexible movement between institutional and grassroots politics in order to see what kind of transformative politics might be possible at the municipal level. While municipalism, in some instances, might look like leveraging power of the local state to implement remunicipalisations, in other contexts it might be more appropriate to wage campaigns and organise communities for economic democracy from outside the corridors of government.

A further critique of municipalism arising from the conference pertains to the potential risk of entrenching geographical inequalities. The worry here is that opportunities for radical urban politics in poorer municipalities will be far slimmer than in richer places and that, therefore, municipalism is an agenda that risks consolidating the power of already wealthy cities. Moreover, David Harvey's intervention made plain the extent to which localised experiments in radical politics are embedded in global processes such as the circulation of capital. How, then, are municipalist experiments to stand a chance of success?

These two challenges point to the need for a municipalist outlook that thinks across scales. Endeavours to build economic democracy must bear in mind the need to inculcate democratic forms of ownership and governance, and radical democracy at all levels beyond merely the urban environment. This can ensure coordination and redistribution to mitigate against geographical inequalities while at the same time helping to promote municipalist experiments that prefigure and contribute to broader scale changes. Municipalism, then, is always a starting point -- not an end in itself. Yet this is not to devalue its importance. In contexts where the political opportunities for radical change at the municipal level are more open than at the national level, taking advantage of this political space can translate into much-needed gains and engaged local populations at the grassroots, while simultaneously building capacity and experience in ways that can translate

into national and international politics when chances arise.

3. DEMOCRATISING PUBLIC MODELS

One of the central attractions of new municipalism is its promise of a radically democratic politics that pursues participatory democratic control as opposed to concentrating power in the hands of "experts" or bureaucrats. For Professor Andy Cumbers of the University of Glasgow, the pre-neoliberal model of public ownership should not be romanticised, as this tended to be highly top-down and centralised, affording service users and workers very little control.

TNI Fellow Hilary Wainwright agreed, arguing that in the UK context, Thatcher was able to privatise services without effective resistance because no democratic ethos or management was ever embedded in any serious way. On a similar note, Cat Hobbs of the pro-public campaign group We Own It proposed that if we want a model of public ownership so successful it cannot again be dismantled, then it must be thoroughly democratised so that citizens and workers have the power to say no.

Indeed, traditional publicly owned enterprises are by no means immune from engaging in highly dubious activities. One example that stood out in the presentation of Sylvia Chi from the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, is the publicly owned Bank of North Dakota in the United States. This now operates in a politically conservative state and was required to provide a loan to the state government to fund a private security firm that used brutal force against the Water Protectors and allies challenging the Dakota Access oil pipeline. On the basis of this, Sylvia concluded: "We need to keep in mind that in public ownership we are looking for public control. It will not always be solved by becoming a publicly owned enterprise." This reflection brings up the key question of what kind of public we wish for.

On the question of public banks and how these might be made more subject to popular control, Dr Thomas Marois of SOAS University, London,



gave the example of Costa Rica's Banco Popular, a publicly owned bank governed through a series of democratic mechanisms. The bank is governed by a workers' assembly constituted by 290 members (half of whom are women) from across 10 social and economic sectors. The bank operates with a mission to serve the social and sustainable welfare of Costa Ricans. Its banking decisions are guided by the goals of gender equity, accessibility and environmental responsibility. Its governing board -- accountable to the assembly yet charged with making key operational decisions -- is also democratised, made up of three government representatives and four representatives elected from the workers assembly. Building on the Banco Popular expertise, Marois stressed that the level of democracy of any public bank depends on social struggle, in other words, the extent to which people are able to organise themselves to demand democratic public banking.

In Terrassa, Catalonia, a civil society platform called Taula de l'Agua de Terrassa (Water is Life Terrassa) recently won its campaign for water remunicipalisation, with a 100% public water company established in June 2018. This came alongside the establishment of the Terrassa Water Observatory, an autonomous organisation affiliated with the council established to enable citizens to consult, advise, deliberate, make proposals, and conduct research around water management in the city. The Observatory is governed by a plenary constituted by representatives from each political party within the municipality, the municipal government itself, technical staff, business, community groups,

unions, education and universities. Agreements and documents produced by The Observatory must be studied by the municipal government. Yet an issue so far has been that actors from within the municipality have been reluctant to give up control or share information with the Observatory.

This illustrates a point made by Hilary Wainwright, which is that while democratised services on their own are important, the potential will not be realised under a non-transparent hierarchical state structure. As such, to democratise public ownership, we also need to democratise the state itself. An example of what this might look like, for Hilary, is Uruguay, which has a democratic constitution enshrining public services and the right to water as a public good. For example, in 2004, after massive protests against water privatisation and a subsequent national referendum, Uruguay was the first country to prohibit water privatisation through its constitution. This cultivates something of a democratic culture within the country, which means that when privatisation is on the cards, people are quick to protest. At the local level, a similar constitutional change (city charter) banning water privatisation was enacted following a referendum in Baltimore (USA) in 2018.

Professor David Hall looked to Kerala, India, to demonstrate the potential of radical democratic control running through the operations of the state. Kerala has a population of 33 million people and is already famous for a progressive leftist government that focuses on health care and education. The level of education of women is exceptionally high and mortality rates are better

than some places in New York City. It is also the only state in India with more women than men. In 1996, the state passed a law affording power and autonomy to local power structures (panchayats), who set planning objectives and budgets. An issue that quickly arose was that women and poorer groups participated less than average. Programmes to tackle this were introduced and after two years, women were participating more than men. A study conducted five years after the law was introduced found that corruption was reduced and most services were improved.

One way of thinking about these forms of radical democracy is through the idea of the commons. If the public has traditionally been conceived of as the realm of the government, the language of the commons is used to depict processes through which people take power themselves by collectively governing resources or services. Commoning -- the creation and regeneration of commons -- can take place through autonomous (or semi-autonomous) citizens' organisations such as cooperatives and community-based non-profit organisations. But it can also take place through the state in the form of what was referred to throughout the conference as public-commons partnerships in which public administration is enhanced and democratised through, for example, collaboration and/or co-ownership with workers and residents. Neoliberalism has been marked by the emergence of public-private partnerships or PPPs. These have hollowed out the capacities of the public sector and placed power in the hands of unaccountable profit-maximising corporations. Public-commons partnerships, on the other hand, reconfigure relations between state, market and society in ways that allow for social and environmental goals to be prioritised.

4. EXPANDING ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY

One of the most striking aspects of the discussion in Amsterdam, was the ways in which public ownership is being expanded beyond traditional services and utilities. If public ownership has previously been about healthcare, education, water, energy and transport, the new public

ownership is arising in the advent of economic democracy in myriad other sectors.

A fantastic example of this is the Chilean commune of Recoleta. Chile, of course, has long been subject to brutal neoliberal reform, including a raft of privatisations that has created a two-tier system between those who can afford public services and those who cannot. Recoleta, a poor migrant commune in the Metropolitan region of Santiago is working hard to buck this trend. Since 2012, Communist Mayor Daniel Jadue has introduced a range of initiatives seeking to reclaim the commons. The country's first "popular pharmacy" was created in 2015 to offer cheap medicines, subsidised for those on lower incomes, meaning savings of up to 70% for some. The local government supported the formation of a new workers' cooperative that took over cleaning services in 2016, enabling a 50% pay increase. In 2018, the Recoleta government established a publicly owned estate agent providing social housing for its poorest families and partnering with the Ministry of Housing to ensure construction of additional affordable housing. And the municipality even established a new "open university" offering 150 courses to 3,300 students.

In Southeastern France, another innovative commune is Mouans-Sartoux. In the wake of the outbreak of mad cow disease of the late 1990s, the municipality here took drastic action to change agricultural and eating practices. Over the course of 10 years, a programme of serving entirely organic food in schools was rolled out; it now delivers 400,000 organic meals a day. These meals are supplied through a publicly owned organic farm spanning 6 hectares of previously abandoned land, tended to by three farmers funded by the municipality. Waste has decreased by 75% in the school meal production process, while a survey showed that 66% of the entire population's eating habits have subsequently changed for the better, towards healthier, local and organic food. The Deputy Mayor of Mouans-Sartoux also pointed out how municipalities are at a disadvantage and unfairly treated when it comes to the procuring food supplies for public canteens. Municipalities are obliged by EU rules to launch a public tender at a European level but cannot choose to buy directly

from the local, small, organic producers next door. While catering corporations that win a tender are free to buy from any supplier they like.

In the UK, meanwhile, the public enterprise of the city council in Preston, in the north of England, has attracted much attention. Like local governments across the country, particularly in de-industrialised parts of the North, Preston has been hard hit by severe austerity and disinvestment. Refusing to accept the disastrous social consequences of this, in 2011 Preston began working with the Centre for Local Economic Strategy think-tank, and developed a model of “community wealth building” inspired by the work of US think tank The Democracy Collaborative in Cleveland, Ohio. The Preston model begins by thinking about the role of so-called “anchor institutions”: large-scale public institutions with an important role in the city such as colleges and healthcare bodies. The idea is to intervene in the procurement practices of these important institutions, encouraging anchor institutions to contract services from local socially responsible suppliers where possible, as opposed to large corporate actors. A recent study showed that this work has increased the procurement spending retained in Preston by £74 million from 2012/13.

Finally, if the future is to be public, then there needs to be a clear strategy by which data might be democratically owned and managed. The Economist magazine recently proclaimed that data is the new oil. While there are many dissimilarities, it is clear that data is now among the most precious commodities in the world. What’s more, data have become increasingly abundant and, worryingly, prone to enclosure by technology giants. The conundrum in thinking through how data might be democratised is that people are extremely wary of affording governments access to their personal information. Yet public innovation around the collectivisation of data is beginning to take off. For example, Amsterdam, Barcelona and New York City recently launched a coalition for digital rights built around five principles: universal access to the internet and digital literacy; privacy, data protection and security; transparency and accountability; participation in democracy and inclusion; open and ethical digital services. Given the move towards so-

called “smart cities” which is set to digitalise much of our everyday lives, forward thinking action from municipalities and governments will be essential in ensuring that privacy, social justice and democracy are protected.

5. CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Privatisation has failed our planet. While we have known about the devastating consequences of climate change for decades, corporations hardwired for profit-maximisation have maintained business as usual. Our electricity grids and transport systems are still dominated by fossil fuels. Our food and water systems are highly polluting, wasteful and intensive. And the neoliberal attack on the public sphere has eroded our society’s capacity to respond collectively. If we are to find our way out of the climate emergency, we need public alternatives that reorientate the economy towards social and environmental justice.

It is in this context that the idea of a “Green New Deal” has gained popularity. Inspired by many years of rethinking about public spending and transformation, along lines of the US’ New Deal of the 1930s, to achieve a just climate transition, the Green New Deal recently rose to popularity in the US. This was inspired by direct action, such as that taken by the Sunrise Movement, including a high-profile occupation of Democrat House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office, which demanded drastic public action to decarbonise the economy with an ambitious programme for social justice. This would include public housing, new jobs, the revaluation of care work and measures to ensure racial justice that address legacies of slavery, colonialism and discrimination. Momentum around the Green New Deal has since spread beyond the US. In the UK, the Labour Party and Green Party fought (but sadly lost) an election with an ambitious Green New Deal at the centre of their manifestos. This included a 2030 decarbonisation target alongside public ownership of energy, water and the railways, mass investment in public housing and healthcare and the creation of thousands of new green jobs and apprenticeships.

The concept of “energy democracy” is proving instrumental in building new public climate futures. Originating in the German climate justice movement, this idea has since been adopted by a range of activist groups and trade unions across the world. Energy democracy advocates do not propose one size fits all solutions for the energy system but, rather, advocate for a range of collective and collaborative alternatives to privatisation including autonomous citizen associations, worker cooperatives, (re)municipalisation and nationalisation, as well as country-wide public planning of the energy transition.



Regarding the former, an inspiring example of autonomous citizen action for energy democracy comes from Palestine. Here, Friends of the Earth member PENGON Palestine has responded to severe energy shortages resulting from the Israeli occupation -- shortages that disproportionately affect women, given a gendered division of labour that sees the feminisation of domestic work such as energy management. PENGON have fought this injustice by supporting women to gain the skills required to install and maintain household solar panels, generating energy for 900 households across Palestine. Its cooperation with the Ministry of Women’s Affairs even led to a gender unit in the Palestinian Energy Authority in order to influence the national planning process around the energy sector.

An example of energy democracy at the municipal level comes from Barcelona, where the City Council has just launched a new municipal energy company, Barcelona Energia in 2018. This has

invested ambitiously in installing new solar panels on public and private roof space in the city. The energy generated is being used to power all of the municipality’s own public services, buildings and infrastructures and, as of 2019, to provide an alternative to the “Big Four” private energy firms for domestic households as well. Barcelona Energia attempts to integrate social justice and democracy into its operations. It offers fair pricing and implements a no cut-offs policy. This in particular serves low-income families and people without legal documentation. It also connects those who are occupying non-residential buildings because of a severe housing shortage. Meanwhile, a new advisory citizens assembly open to all users has been established to discuss the company’s operations and offer advice as to how any surplus generated should be reinvested.

While Barcelona Energia was awarded the 2019 TNI “Transformative Cities” award in the field of energy, it should be acknowledged that energy activists in Barcelona are not fully satisfied with the initiative’s progression. In particular, the democratic oversight of the scheme is seen by the Catalan Energy Sovereignty Network as inadequate: the advisory assembly has thus far failed to attract much interest or participation and it has no formal decision-making power within the company. What becomes clear from this example is that endeavours towards energy democracy – and economic democracy more broadly – should be conceived of as part of an ongoing struggle-laden process of democratisation. Successes and victories are usually imperfect and partial openings for further contestation, rather than idealised end points.

The case of Eskom, South Africa’s public energy utility company, gives further cause for reflection on the challenges of building energy democracy -- in particular through state-owned enterprises. This company is currently in a deep crisis, on the brink of collapse: years of mismanagement have led to severe financial difficulties for Eskom. This crisis is reinforced by power purchasing agreements with private enterprises as their profits are guaranteed by the government. This financial crisis, together with needs to decarbonise energy production, is now used to justify the unbundling (break-up) and eventual privatisation of Eskom as a public utility.

The Eskom Reference Research Group² is resisting this neoliberal agenda. Instead of privatisation, this progressive coalition is currently formulating a set of proposals to reform and rebuild Eskom in a way that would maintain public ownership while enhancing democratic management and the company's capacity to deliver a just transition. One of the options being explored by the coalition is horizontal integration, meaning an integrated energy system that combines diverse forms of democratic public ownership and management, from a vertically integrated national power company in charge of generation and transmission to well-functioning municipal utilities responsible for distribution and retail.



However we go about decarbonising our economy, a fundamental question remains: economic growth. David Harvey, in his keynote lecture, noted that the ecological consequences of compound growth – which sees the economy double in size every 25 years – are a key reason to be anti-capitalist today. We simply cannot continue to expand the mass of capital, commodities and carbon emissions that we have in the world: capitalism, in Harvey's words, “has become too big to fail, but far too monstrous to survive”. Thus, a key question for us, as architects of new public futures, is how we can democratically plan an economy beyond compound growth. How might our society function should things be built to last rather than made to

2 The Eskom Reference Research Group is an alliance of South African trade unions, civil society groups, the international coalition Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) and TNI.

break? What other forms of abundance can be imagined beyond the spectacle of instant consumer gratification? In what ways might new freedoms be unearthed if we were to slow down, work less and take more time to care for ourselves and our collective improvement?

6. TOWARDS FEMINIST PUBLIC FUTURES

Feminist movements have long stressed that our struggle must be waged not only around conventional economic “production” but, further, around social reproduction. Or, put differently, that our task is not only to reorganise “the economy” as traditionally conceived but, more than this, the practices and relationships implicated within the sustenance of life more broadly. A capitalist division of labour renders “life's work” as deeply gendered and racialised: the unpaid domestic and emotional labour required to make sure “workers” turn up to work, day-in-day-out, has historically tended to be done by women, with some white middle-class women able to outsource cleaning, childcare and other chores to women of colour, often those migrating from the global South. If this, then, is the deeply unjust way in which life is reproduced under capitalist patriarchy, anti-capitalist feminisms invite us to remake social reproduction such that this is rendered more dignified, egalitarian and collective.

This is a helpful outlook when thinking through the kinds of public futures we want. Firstly, it provides a means of orienting ourselves in debates around the state (section 7). For each time the problem is posed of whether we ought to be attempting to seize state power or dismantle it, we can stop and think: what course of action is most likely to transform our everyday lives. This gives us an open, context-specific and flexible starting point for navigating our way through thorny political terrain. Moreover, a feminist perspective helps us think through debates around scale, abandoning dichotomies between local and national action by highlighting the ways in which changing our everyday locally-grounded practices and relationships might prefigure and begin to enact broader scale changes. Feminist movements encourage us to be attentive to the ways we do politics, as well as

our long-term goals. The conference organisers sought to emphasise that imperative by grounding discussions where possible in the local struggles of Bijlmermeer. The point is not that a feminist outlook is necessarily limited to a localised outlook. Indeed, those advocating this perspective within the conference were absolutely clear on their aspirations for global scale transformation of the patriarchal capitalist system. What the feminist lens helps make visible, though, is the ways in which our everyday life is a vital terrain of struggle for enacting broader scale change. For it is through our everyday interactions with each other and the world around us that our common sense assumptions and political subjectivities are made and remade. In sum, the feminist perspective helps us think across levels and among scales and allows us to make connections between the local, national and global that might otherwise be obscured.

This perspective also offers a distinctive take on the kinds of values that a public ecofeminist future might embody. An ecofeminist lense recognises the equality and interdependence of human beings and the ecosystems we inhabit. This perspective builds on theory and practice generated across the global South, from India to Latin America, and was articulated by many throughout the conference, particularly by those from within Catalan organisations such as Engineers Without Borders and the Observatory of Debt and Globalisation.

Ecofeminism puts the emphasis on care -- care for human life and, moreover, for the non-human world. This, it should be stressed, is not because of any innate disposition towards care on the part of women, but, rather, an intimate knowledge of the importance of care gained by women and non-binary people through the process of feminist struggle. Privatisation, after all, has rendered our public services profoundly lacking in the forms of care that ought to be at their heart. Those working in hospitals, schools and services for elderly and disabled people do so under intense time-pressures and highly precarious conditions, making the formation of nourishing and fulfilling relationships extremely challenging. Meanwhile, our energy, food, transport and water systems are based on perpetual extraction and systematic

violence towards both humans and non-humans, resulting in the climate and ecological emergency we now face.

What if our economy was oriented around life and care instead of profits and growth? A number of steps in this direction might be taken. Examples raised during the conference included: the de-privatisation of care-based services; new training for public servants that emphasises the quality of relationships rather than market efficiency; and the reorientation of investment away from socially and ecologically destructive industries towards forms of caring labour which are inherently low-carbon, as well as being of immense social use.

Finally, the work done by black and decolonial feminist activists can help us cast a critical eye on the notion of an alternative future that runs through this report and the conference that preceded it. Colonialism has historically entailed the violent imposition of a white European worldview on racialised "others", meaning the universalisation of one historically and geographically specific set of values in ways that erase other ways of being and doing. If our alternative to neoliberalism and privatisation is to be decolonial, we must give up all aspirations towards the construction of a singular homogenising future shared by all. It would be better, to think in plural terms and to imagine multiple public futures evolving together.

7. THE STATE OF THE FUTURE

How, then, to move forward with building economic democracy? The conference illuminated a wealth of diverse cases, approaches and ideas that, together, constitute the foundations for a new political economic paradigm. Yet there were many very real disagreements that must be acknowledged. For it is in working through our differences – always with solidarity and companionship – that our collective intelligence and knowledge can best be harnessed.

At the heart of many of the debates during the conference, were questions around the state: Is the state a vehicle for emancipatory change or an obstacle? Should the goal be to seize state power or bypass this? Can the state be democratised

or is democracy something that happens on the streets? Should our focus be the local state or the national state? How might the postcolonial state differ from the northern imperialist state?

That these questions emerged is not surprising. The question of the state has, of course, animated debate on the left for centuries. And given our overarching task in Amsterdam was to think through possibilities for public futures, we inevitably had to grapple with the question of who, in fact, constitutes the public -- a question that cannot be separated from the operations of state power and its relationship to broader society.

One danger is that we fall back into old binaries: we are either for the state or against it; we work only inside the state or outside of it; we are either militant municipalists or else committed centralisers. These kinds of dichotomies have rarely proved helpful in the past and it is unlikely that they will prove generative in the battles ahead. For “the state” is not a unitary actor or thing that we can choose to embrace or ignore but, rather, a set of institutions embedded within broader relations of power that we are inescapably part of.



Chilean activist and academic Alexander Panez Pinto’s contribution to the conference’s closing session offered one productive way forward. Our challenge, for Alexander, is finding ways to struggle with, against and beyond the state. As the numerous cases of public ownership discussed

in the conference highlight, the state can protect our rights and open up spaces for real democracy and freedom. For this reason, we must work with the state. Yet, simultaneously, we must struggle to end abuse and lawless violence by state agents: whether through the criminalisation of migrants in Bijlmermeer, Amsterdam or the brutal attacks on protestors in recent demonstrations across Chile. Accordingly, our struggle must ultimately look beyond the state and the violence and oppression it currently perpetuates, always searching for ways that people can reclaim autonomy and direct control over the commons.

This struggle with, against and beyond the state, for Alexander, can be guided as follows:

“Going beyond the discussion of public ownership, we need to look at how we organise life. All life, not just human life. How does life reproduce itself? For this we need to reinvent all the political horizons we think within.”

Building on this ecofeminist reflection, questions such as that of the state and scale can only be resolved through struggles situated in particular places at particular times. What economic democracy looks like in Lagos might be very different to that in London -- and differences like this must be respected and valued rather than papered over or invalidated.

Various forms of future collaboration were proposed in Amsterdam, from further conferences and joint research through to the creation of new networks and even manifestos. The passion for cooperation and collective endeavour that was present in Amsterdam was inspiring and must be channelled into action. Yet, let’s not forget, our goal is not to replace one false set of universals with another. Onwards we move, then, towards diverse and overlapping democratic economies, towards as many new public futures as we can dream, as many new public futures as we can win.

The Transnational Institute (TNI) is an international research and advocacy institute committed to building a just, democratic and sustainable planet. For more than 40 years, TNI has served as a unique nexus between social movements, engaged scholars and policy makers.

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