

# THE CITY AS THE NEW POLITICAL CENTRE

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**JOAN SUBIRATS**  
 BY **LORENZO MARSILI**

A radical change is taking place. Cities around Europe – through platforms, movements and international networks – are creating paths for citizens to participate in and influence politics directly. Joan Subirats, one of the founders of Barcelona’s municipalist platform Barcelona en Comú, discusses how cities can deal with uncertainty and provide a new type of protection, reverse the trend of tech giants owning all our data, and even defy their nation-states on issues such as refugees.

**LORENZO MARSILI:** A spectre seems to be haunting Europe: the spectre of the cities. Why do you think there is such symbolic power in what you are doing in Barcelona?

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** There are certainly various factors. One general factor is the transformation to a more platform-based capitalism – a monopolistic, digital capitalism – in which states have lost the ability to respond because the big players are the investment funds, Google, Apple, Facebook, and Microsoft. States are then trapped in the logic of debt and austerity policy. At the same time, the population faces increasing difficulties and there is a sense of uncertainty and fear, a feeling of not knowing what will happen in the future; what will happen to my standard of living, what will happen to my country, and what will happen to us? Many years ago, the philosopher Karl Polanyi talked about the movement towards commodification and the counter-movement of protection. Where do you turn today for protection?

**Many would still argue to the state.**

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** Yes, the state is the classic place to turn to demand protection. Following a more conservative, closed, and xenophobic

logic, the state is still a space where you can claim protection, in many cases by closing borders and closing societies. However, cities are different in nature because they were born to be open. “The city air makes us feel free”<sup>1</sup>, as the adage goes. Cities are spaces that gather opportunities and possibilities. The proximity of city authorities and political actors offers another kind of protection, much closer and tangible to citizens, albeit admittedly with fewer policy competences and powers than the nation-state. This means that cities seem to be a space where some things – but not everything – can change and change for the better.

**Speaking of Polanyi, the philosophy professor Nancy Fraser claims that the second movement, the movement of protection, is one that historically defended primarily the male, white, Western breadwinner against women, minorities, and the Global South. And so she introduces the need for a third movement: one of autonomy and emancipation. To what extent can the 'protection' of the city differ from traditional state protection?**

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** It’s a very good question, because it links in with the Ada Colau factor, the Barcelona factor, the PAH factor [Platform of People Affected by Mortgages], and the anti-eviction movement. There is a specific type of change happening in relation to the PAH, which

I think is highly significant. When someone goes to the PAH saying they are having problems and cannot pay the mortgage, and that they will be evicted, they meet others facing the same problems who tell them: “We are not going to solve your problem. You have to become an activist, so we can solve our problems together.” This means that you are not a client of the PAH – you must become a PAH activist, so that you can change things together. And this is a process of emancipation, not a process of service provision, and it does not follow the outsourcing logic of unions or political parties: “Come and delegate your issues to us, then we will defend your ideas in your name.” This delegating approach does not exist in the PAH. The PAH involves making people more active.

**How does this become institutionalised? To what extent do these processes of politicisation, of activation – which are also at the basis of the discourse on the commons in the end, with co-ownership and co-management – end up in the policies of the administration?**

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** This is the big initiative that started in May 2015. There were four basic points in the Barcelona en Comú manifesto in the elections, and these could be adopted by other similar platforms elsewhere in Spain. The first was to give control of institutions back to the people, institutions have been captured,

<sup>1</sup> After ‘*Stadtluft macht frei*’, a German medieval dictum describing a principle of law that offered freedom and land to settlers who took up urban residence for more than “a year and a day.”

and they are not serving our interests. Secondly, people are being put in an increasingly precarious situation, financially and socially. Inequality is increasing, basic social protection mechanisms are being destroyed. We still need to recover the capacity to provide protection, so there is a social emergency that demands a response. Thirdly, we have to build up a more participative democracy that does not delegate. It is not easy, but we must make people more involved in the decisions that affect them. That is where you get onto co-production of policy, co-creation of decisions, etc. The fourth point is that we have to end corruption and cronyism in politics, which people perceive as privilege. Salaries need to be reduced, things have to be done transparently, mandates must be limited – in short, there needs to be more morality in politics.

### And how is it going?

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** To start with, I would say that the most significant progress has certainly been made on the second point: making better thought-out policies to respond to the social emergency. This has in some ways restored legitimacy on the first point: recovering institutions for a different type of politics. Secondly, there are no corruption scandals

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anywhere in the ‘cities of change’. The rather difficult point that I think still poses difficulties is making institutions more participative, and developing co-production of policy. This is

because the traditions, routines, and working methods of the institutions are a long way from this approach. Our institutions have a very 19th and 20th century approach, they are very pre-digital, and discussing ‘co-production’

involves talking about methods for including collective intelligence in such processes – it’s not easy.

**There is a very interesting international debate on technological sovereignty, moving beyond a system where all data and all social interactions are monetised by the giants of Silicon Valley. What exactly are you are doing on the digital commons?**

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** We have begun changing the base of proprietary software used by the municipal council, and ensuring that contracts made between the council and software providers do not cede the data used for those services to the companies. This also means ensuring that, in a city that is home to Smart Cities and the Mobile World Congress, technological innovation alters the city’s approach, whilst at the same time changing

the thinking behind these forums, although this is no easy task. This is why we appointed a commissioner for innovation and technological sovereignty. For instance, we are working on a new contract for a joint transport card to cover trains, buses, and the underground. This card will be manufactured by a provider, and the contract should specify that the local public transport data of all the residents of Barcelona will be controlled by the public authorities. It is a debate about sovereignty – not state sovereignty, but energy, water, food, and digital sovereignty. Those are the public priorities and the needs that are being debated.

**I like the concept of 'sovereignty of proximity' or 'sovereignties', as too often sovereignty is equated simply with national sovereignty. But many constitutions, such as the Italian one, state that "sovereignty belongs to the people", not to the nation-state! Yet, in constitutional arrangements the role of cities is still very limited; their actual competences are narrow. Wouldn't any attempt to place the city at the centre of a renewed governance require a national-level political fight to change the allocation of competences between the different levels?**

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** I like talking about the question of the 'level of responsibility' of municipalities, which is high because they have very broad agendas, in terms of responding to the demands of citizens. However their 'level of

powers' – what they are able to do – is much lower. Not everything can be solved locally, it is obvious. And surely, that is why Barcelona en Comú is trying to build a movement across Catalonia. It is called Catalunya en Comú and it works within a logic of federal alliances with Podemos. This is because if you are unable to have influence at the level of Catalonia itself – where education and healthcare policies are decided – or at the state level, you are not able to act. But at the same time, it is true that at the local level, you are able to intervene more than your powers may suggest. My political mobilisation can reach further than my powers. In other words, the conflict is not only legal, but also political. For example, you may not have powers regarding housing in Catalonia. In Barcelona, these powers are in the hands of the autonomous Generalitat or the state. But you can also take it to the streets with political mobilisations to solve housing problems, and there you can make alliances against Airbnb – with Berlin, with Amsterdam, and with New York. That dynamic will force Airbnb to respond, even though the Spanish, U.S., and Dutch states are unable to solve the problem. So I think we should not be limited by the idea that there are no legal powers.

**The opposition between city and state is interesting here. We have a paradoxical situation, as you know, where many cities across Europe – Barcelona is one of them – would like to welcome refugees and yet their nation-states**

often block this. The Spanish government is no exception. Could we envision a disobedient act, where a city would unilaterally welcome a certain number of refugees? Interestingly, you would be disobeying the national government but paradoxically you would be obeying the European scheme on refugee relocation that the national government is itself disobeying in the first place.

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** Yes, that is a good example and I think it could be implemented. It would certainly have more political effect than real effect, as you would not solve the big problem of refugees. However you would be sending a very clear message that it is possible to do things at city level and that people are prepared to do things, and it would not just be rhetoric. Certainly, in other cases similar things could be done. In fact, action has been taken here, for example on the ability of property investment funds to buy buildings. The municipal council of Barcelona cannot legally break the law, but it has made it more difficult in many ways for investment funds to make those deals. In some cases it has even foiled these purchases by buying a building itself to prevent it becoming a target for speculation.

German politician Gesine Schwan is bringing forward a proposal to directly connect the European-level relocation of refugees with municipalities, by essentially bypassing the nation-state. Do you think that we need to

review the institutional levels that currently govern the European Union, which are mostly organised according to a 'nation-state to European Union' structure, thinking instead of a 'municipality to European Union' structure?

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** Yes, I think that this is an area where we can connect existing experiences. There are organisations like EuroCities that have been created for benchmarking and learning between cities. There are working groups dealing with mobility, social policy, and so on. I think that we should follow up more on this approach of coordinating at local level, and we should look for opportunities to have a direct dialogue with the European Union, skipping the state level. I think it will not be at all easy because nation-states have captured the European decision-making structure. So even if cities had an ally in the European Union, it would not be easy, but it could be done. I believe that the European Union would be rather reluctant to take that step. I think the way would be to create a European forum of local authorities, which would grow in strength, and would be able to make the leap in this area.

Can you imagine a European network of cities of change that acts a bit as a counter-power, as much to the European Union as to nation-states?

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** I think it is not only possible but desirable. I think that the Barcelona

municipal authority is already moving in that direction. Many years ago, Barcelona made Sarajevo its eleventh district, and there is also a strong collaboration between Barcelona and the Gaza Strip in Palestine, including a very close relationship with municipal technical officials working in Gaza. The municipality of Barcelona's tradition of international cooperation is well-established, so building on this would be nothing new.

**There seems to be a particularity about Europe, namely the existence of a transnational political structure that governs the spaces that we happen to inhabit. The political theorist Benjamin Barber proposed a global parliament of mayors – which clearly is a very interesting intellectual proposal at the global level because there is no global government. But in Europe we do have at least a simulacrum of a European government. Do you think one could envisage creating an institutionally recognised space for cities, like a European parliament of cities?**

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** It could be done but for it to be really constructive and powerful and for it to make progress, it should not be shaped initially by institutions, bureaucrats, or organisations. It should rather work on the basis of encounters from below and building the legitimacy of mayors that have made an impact (in Naples, Madrid, Barcelona, etc.). It should be seen to be a process working from

the bottom up, without any desire to make quick political capital from above. This would be much more resilient and it would ultimately be powerful.

**Building a European and international role for cities is a very demanding task. Often when I go and advocate for these ideas with city administrations I notice that municipalities very often lack the staff and the offices to deal with this more political or diplomatic work. If we posit a new global or European role for cities then cities need to invest in an institutional machinery that can actually perform this work.**

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** This is certainly true. The shortcomings that you mention could certainly be addressed if we worked with a more metropolitan approach. The term municipality does not always refer to the same thing: Madrid covers 600 km<sup>2</sup> and Barcelona 100 km<sup>2</sup>. Paris is divided into the City of Paris and Greater Paris. If we worked to build the concept of a Greater Barcelona rather than the City of Barcelona, this would mean moving from 1.5 million inhabitants to 3.5 million. The 25 town councils that make up the metropolitan area would certainly agree to invest resources to foster international processes. Paris may already be working on this, and it has a metropolitan dimension that could be strengthened. It is certainly true that there is a lack of staff and tradition.

People think in global terms without stopping to think that cities always have to go through the state to work internationally. This situation would be eased by focusing on the metropolis.

**Let's close with the global dimension proper. More than half the world's population lives in urban areas, while the top 100 cities produce just under half the world's GDP. In June 2017, Barcelona hosted a global summit, Fearless Cities, bringing together mayors from across the world to commit to joint initiatives to tackle precisely the global challenges that national leadership seems increasingly unable to address. How do you see this developing further? What concrete actions could be put in place?**

**JOAN SUBIRATS:** In my opinion the best way would be to work with a concrete agenda, and to find the issues that can most easily draw cities in and connect with them. For example, the issue of redistribution, the question of the minimum wage – which has sparked debate in London, Seattle, and New York – and issues of housing, primary education, energy, and water. We could start with issues like these, that are clearly cross-cutting and global, affecting everywhere in the world, and start linking agendas across Europe in a more specific way. This would facilitate the political and institutional side, and we could make the leap more quickly. When people see the shortcomings in the area of policies, this will highlight the shortcomings in the area of polity. ■



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