Remunicipalisation, Mutating Neoliberalism, and the Conjuncture

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Abstract: There is a growing interest in the progressive potential of remunicipalisation, a global trend for towns, cities, and even subnational regions to take formerly privatised assets and services back into public ownership. In this paper, we offer a novel conceptualisation of remunicipalisation, developing a spatialised conjunctural perspective through critical engagement with the work of Stuart Hall, Antonio Gramsci, and recent geographical scholarship on political economy transitions. This draws attention to the open, dynamic, political, and spatially diverse aspects of remunicipalisation as part of a mutating process of neoliberalism. Emphasising the conjunctural insight of neoliberalism's shifting and variegated terrain on which progressive forces have to mobilise, our theorisation has implications for left political strategy and broader transformative projects against a backdrop of global economic, social, and ecological crisis.

Resumen: Existe un creciente interés en el potencial progresista de las remunicipalizaciones, una tendencia a nivel global por la cual ciudades, e incluso regiones subnacionales, recuperan la propiedad pública de recursos y servicios previamente privatizados. En este artículo presentamos una conceptualización novedosa sobre el fenómeno de las remunicipalizaciones. Desarrollamos una perspectiva atenta al análisis de las coyunturas y los espacios, a partir de un diálogo crítico con los trabajos de Stuart Hall, Antonio Gramsci, y con estudios provenientes de la geografía sobre las transiciones en la economía política. Esto implica prestar atención al carácter abierto y dinámico y a la diversidad política y espacial de las remunicipalizaciones como parte de los procesos de mutación del neoliberalismo. Colocamos énfasis en comprender el aspecto coyuntural del terreno cambiante y variado en el que se mueve el neoliberalismo, en donde las fuerzas progresistas deben movilizarse. En tal sentido, nuestra teorización tiene implicancias para pensar estrategias políticas de izquierda y proyectos de transformación más amplios contra el trasfondo de la crisis económica, social, y ecológica a nivel global.

Keywords: remunicipalisation, neoliberalism, mutation, conjuncture, democratic publics

Introduction

There is a growing interest on the left in the phenomenon of remunicipalisation (e.g. Becker et al. 2015; Cumbers and Becker 2018; McDonald 2018), a global trend evident since the early 2000s for towns, cities, and in some cases sub-national regions to take previously privatised assets and services back into local public—hence municipal—ownership (Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017; Kishimoto et al.

2020). Although there is a developing literature documenting its emergence in response to the failings of privatisation (e.g. Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017; Kishimoto et al. 2020; Pigeon et al. 2012), it currently lacks a broader systemic analysis. Thus far, research has been confined to case study-based approaches and country or sector specific analyses, particularly in water and energy (e.g. Aldag et al. 2019; Becker et al. 2015; Cumbers 2016; McDonald 2018; Wagner and Berlo 2017).

On the left, remunicipalisation has been associated with the growth of a pro-public alliance and campaigns for more democratic forms of public ownership and governance (Cumbers and Becker 2018; Kishimoto et al. 2020), although some emphasise caution against overstating its transformative potential, given continued neoliberal and top-down elite municipal governance (McDonald and Swyngedouw 2019). In this light, our purpose here is to provide a critical analysis of the global remunicipalisation trend, interrogating its wider significance as a systemic pushback against privatisation and its potential for forging more democratic alternatives. We do this by situating remunicipalisation within broader processes of neoliberal governance and their diverse spatial manifestations.

Our argument is that remunicipalisation must be understood both as an element of systemic neoliberal mutation and its contradictions, but also as a markedly variegated phenomenon reflecting particular trajectories of political economy in diverse geographical settings. We deploy a Gramscian inspired "conjunctural" approach (Gramsci 1971; Hall 1988) that situates remunicipalisation within longer-term processes, while being attentive to the more immediate fluid political currents of particular moments. Such moments have the potential to dramatically rupture and reshape the terrain of political-economic governance. Spatially, a conjunctural approach is valuable in positioning key moments of political economy transition and crisis within longer-term multi-scalar governance trajectories but also in interpreting the geographically variegated manner in which new political and economic combinations emerge (Peck 2017).

The paper initially charts the development of remunicipalisation as a global trend, before assessing the existing literature and knowledge concerned with it. We then develop our own conceptualisation, envisaging it as a critical moment within a broader conjuncture of neoliberal governance crisis. In doing so, we recognise the variegated spatial and historical contexts within which remunicipalisation emerges, the diverse trajectories of neoliberal-inflected governance, as well as the open-ended and fluid relational politics that characterise conjunctures. Our argument is illustrated through the very different conjunctural trajectories of remunicipalisation experiences in Argentina and Germany. We conclude with a restatement of the conceptual value of a conjunctural perspective for interpreting remunicipalisation and broader political economy transitions, before considering some implications for left political strategy.

Remunicipalisation as a Global Pushback against Privatisation

In June 2017, the Transnational Institute (TNI) published a landmark report documenting 835 cases of cities, towns, and regions on all continents that had taken

privatised services back into local public ownership since 2000 (Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017). Although occurring across many different sectors, it is most prevalent in the energy sector (especially Germany, which we discuss below) with 311 cases, followed by water (267) and local government (140). Subsequent research has revealed a total of 1,408 cases (Kishimoto et al. 2020), with 924 cases of de-privatisation—the remunicipalisaton of privatised services—and 484 cases of new public enterprises being established, so-called municipalisation (see Figure 1). Two further terms require definitions here—de-privatisation and rena-tionalisation—as they are often used in the same context as remunicipalisation. At a basic level, *de-privatisation* refers to the process of taking previously privatised services and infrastructures at all scales back into public ownership. *Renationalisations* are examples of de-privatisation at the national level, while *remunicipalisations* are examples of de-privatisation at the local, municipal, or regional (inter-municipal) level.

Like many apparently global phenomena, remunicipalisation is spatially diverse, reflecting the variegated nature of "actually existing" neoliberal inspired privatisa-tions (Brenner et al. 2010; Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002), and the pushback against them. Decisions to reverse privatisation typically reflect a set of commonly experienced problems around poor performance, escalating costs, and lack of promised infrastructure improvements. These broader shared experiences intersect with particular local and national political-economic

Figure 1: The global remunicipalisation trend (source: Kishimoto et al. 2020:21; reproduced here with permission)

trajectories and are "nested" within broader multiscalar governance relations, involving multinational corporations, financial institutions, and transnational governance organisations such as the European Union, IMF, and World Bank.

While there have been examples of higher level de-privatisations in recent years (see Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017), remunicipalisation—as a local phenomenon—captures a particularly important element of neoliberal governance failure at subnational scales in relation to basic service provision (water, energy, and waste services) as well as, increasingly, the poor performance of outsourced services in education, transport, health and social care. These services are all essential to social reproduction and (basic) needs; their privatisation has involved critical material failures that can have local political effects and grassroots citizen mobilisations which can also cascade upwards.

Remunicipalisation first gained wider public prominence in Latin America. In response to widespread Washington Consensus-inspired water privatisations in the 1990s, their subsequent failure to deliver promises of modernisation and investment, and poor service delivery, social movement coalitions successfully organised campaigns of resistance in the early 2000s. The most celebrated were Bolivia's "water wars" that saw privatised water contracts, led by foreign consortia, terminated and new municipal water companies set up in La Paz and Cochabamba. These were part of a bigger retreat of foreign private capital and multinationals from the continent, following growing public resistance and falling profits (Lobina and Hall 2007) with remunicipalisation cases recorded in Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, and Venezuela, plus a full water renationalisation in Uruguay (Lobina and Hall 2013). Further water remunicipalisations occurred across both global South and global North (Lobina 2017). Also notable is a widespread tendency in the US for cities and towns to take back control of their water and waste disposal services following poor experiences with private contractors, with 61 cases identified including major cities such as New York, Atlanta, and Houston (Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017).

Elsewhere, the pushback against privatisation has been particularly notable in the energy sector, with Germany the key epicentre. In the 1990s, and under pressure from EU market liberalisation processes, many German towns and cities either sold partial shares or transferred public energy services over to private operators, though often on a franchise basis. As many of these concessions have come up for renewal, municipalities have taken services and infrastructures back in-house. This has resulted in a significant number (at least 305 cases according to TNI [Kishimoto et al. 2020]) of remunicipalisations from the mid-2000s, in some instances after public campaigns and successful social mobilisations (see below). Other notable recent developments have been the trend for UK local authorities (55 cases) to take formerly out-sourced services back in-house to save on costs—ironically, many spurred by the experience of austerity-driven national policies (Hall 2012).

Interrogating Remunicipalisation: Between Political Advocacy and Critical Debate

The term remunicipalisation first emerged through the work of various trade union and advocacy groups, and was first used for academic purposes by PSIRU

(Public Services International Research Unit)[1] researchers at the University of Greenwich in 2001, recording the French city Grenoble's successful battle to bring its sanitation system and water services into public ownership (Bictin 2018; Hall and Lobina 2001). Subsequently other water remunicipalisations were recorded by the Municipal Services Project (funded by the Canadian SSRC) (e.g. McDonald and Swyngedouw 2019; Pigeon et al. 2012).

Further work by PSIRU (e.g. Hall 2012) established a broader cross-sectoral trend for privatised services to return to local municipal ownership across Europe (see also Halmer and Hauenschild 2014), while the equivalent German term, "Rekommunalisierung", began to be used by researchers cataloguing an accelerating trend in German energy and water sectors (e.g. Hachfeld 2009; Höffler et al. 2013; Libbe 2013; Wagner and Berlo 2017). Perhaps the most critical actor in bringing remunicipalisation to the attention of the broader public, though, has been TNI, an Amsterdam-based think tank and advocacy group, whose joint work with the Corporate Europe Observatory firmly established it as a global phenomenon (Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017). There are also a number of progressive think tanks and advocacy groups, notably the Washington-based Democracy Collaborative, and Food and Water Watch, cataloguing cases of remunicipalisation and public ownership in the US (e.g. Grant 2015; Hanna 2018). Despite their diversity, these groups have formed an impressive pro-public global network, including the authors of this paper, advocating democratic public ownership as an alternative to market-driven privatisation.[2]

Alongside this advocacy work has been an academic debate on remunicipalisation. At one level, it can be viewed as a "pendulum swing"—part of a Polanyian movement of social and state re-regulation in the wake of the failings and contradictions of privatisation and marketisation (e.g. Hall et al. 2013; Warner and Clifton 2014). However, history and Polanyi remind us that such a "double movement" can be progressive, but also turn malign in its implications for society and democracy. The retreat of the market and the return to state solutions can easily be in the guise of "strong government", and the restrictions of individual freedoms and rights, as Polanyi's analysis of the rise of fascism in the wake of the failings of the liberal market economy in the 1930s makes clear (see Polanyi 2001:245–256). Some of the recent nationalisation programmes undertaken in Hungary can be seen in this light (Kozarzewski et al. 2021; McDonald 2018). Indeed, there is considerable political diversity in the remunicipalisation process (Hall et al. 2013) and the actors participating within it, ranging from different shades of left, green, centrist, and even right-wing elements (see McDonald 2018).

Three important perspectives are identifiable in academic debates. The first is a set of narrowly based surveys of local public sector managers, primarily in the US but with minor fragments of evidence from Europe (e.g. Campos-Alba et al. 2020; Clifton et al. 2019; Gradus and Budding 2020; Warner and Aldag 2019). While these authors recognise some growth in in-sourcing (i.e. remunicipalisation) in recent years, they also point out that out-sourcing and privatisation continue to be important trends, too, leading them to caution against over-hyping remunicipalisation as a progressive phenomenon. A rather more startling claim made is

that remunicipalisation is largely devoid of politics, reflecting a "pragmatic market management process" by local government officials when evaluating various choices of public service delivery. In this sense, this body of work is rather narrowly focused around a limited selection of social actors, rather than immersed in the broader canvas of municipal politics, its relations with civil society, and how these locales are related to wider processes of spatial political economy (see Lobina and Weghmann 2020).

A second critical left perspective is evident from research into the water sector, which shares the caution of the "pragmatist" camp, while noting that many de-privatisations do not depart in practice from new public management principles (McDonald and Swyngedouw 2019) and an increased tendency for local government to create "arm's length" utilities operating with little to distinguish them from private counterparts. Indeed, austerity-driven cutbacks to local government since the financial crisis in many countries will have exacerbated these managerialist trends, although there is some research suggesting a more varied picture where trade unions, local citizens, and public employees can in some settings continue to prosecute different social and collectivist values in local government (e.g. Johnson et al. 2019). There are also important continuing obstacles faced by proponents of remunicipalisation, not least dominant neoliberal ideological discourses among supranational organisations like the World Bank, IMF, and EU, allied to powerful opposition from multinational corporations, often hostile national governments, and the considerable legal hurdles to be surmounted.

A third critical left perspective, with which we would align ourselves, notes these cautionary tales, accepts that remunicipalisation processes are fraught with tension and contradictions, but nonetheless offer the possibility for the building of progressive coalitions out of diverse pluralities and more radical democratic transformations (e.g. Angel 2017; Becker et al. 2015, 2020; Cumbers and Becker 2018; Lobina et al. 2019). Understanding the progressive or radical democratic potential of remunicipalisation means situating individual cases spatially and temporally. How are they connected to broader ongoing municipal politics and struggles? And to what extent can they help build broader progressive alliances, in the sense described by Margaret Kohn (2003) of early 20th century Italian municipalisms where social spaces were forums for the encounter of diverse left political formations that could through discourse recognise commonalities?

Remunicipalisation through this lens is a more open-ended process where "the scope of political agency is both uncertain and emergent" (Cooper 2017:351). It can also be usefully juxtaposed with "new municipalism" (Russell 2019; Thompson 2021) in the context of neoliberal urbanism and austerity, whereby grassroots actors are challenging local elite managerialism and evoking an alternative radical democratic politics in three ways. First, through a productive yet critical engagement with the public spaces of the municipal state, in effect aiming to turn the local state into democratic spaces of self-governance by citizens (Roth 2019). Second, by invoking an alternative politics of solidarity, feminism, community, and social justice in opposition to market-based individualism as a means of eroding capitalist values within the local state (Wright 2019). And, finally, as an outward looking imaginary that locates local action within a broader spatial framing (Thompson 2021).

Remunicipalisation, as a concrete phenomenon of reclaiming public organisations from privatised forms, does play a part in this imaginary as both a tool to relocate power and decision-making, as well as a potential starting point to envision related transformations, such as a politics of the commons or experiments with participatory democracy at local and regional scales (cf. Bieler and Jordan 2018). While many of the remunicipalisations that have taken place to date have some radical motivations (such as economic democracy, worker control, or zero carbon goals), few actors involved would explicitly regard themselves as "anti-capitalist" per se (see Cumbers and Paul 2020). Nevertheless, the very act of reclaiming public ownership from private control is a challenge to capitalism and the logic of exchange value, a recognition of its contradictions in relation to meeting social needs. Remunicipalisation does in this sense also need to be located within the broader progressive pro-public movement for creating more democratic and accountable forms of public ownership in opposition both to privatisation and older hierarchical forms of statism (Paul 2020).

Remunicipalisation is of interest especially because of its emergent, disruptive, and generative politics (Featherstone 2008, 2013), with mobilisations potentially creating new coalitions that bring together the "usual suspects" of new municipalism—grassroots left and green activists—with NGOs, trade unions, and hitherto "un-politicised" citizens, new groups, and emergent campaigners, through dissatisfaction with the effects of privatisation on basic local service provision.[3] This is not to "overhype" or falsely proselytise the democratic and egalitarian potential of remunicipalisation—as some commentators suggest (Clifton et al. 2019)—but merely to highlight its possibilities, albeit contingent upon particular spatial trajectories and temporal contexts. This is where we see the merits of a conjunctural analysis (e.g. Grossman 2006; Hall 1988; Hall with Schwarz 2017; Jessop 2017).

A Conjunctural Approach to Political Economy Transitions

In its most basic Gramscian sense, a conjunctural approach pays attention to the specificities of the historical moment and does not "mechanistically" read off political changes from underlying economic processes (Gramsci 1971:178). In his analysis of economic and political crises, moments of historical rupture and social transformation, Gramsci makes a distinction between organic features of a social system, which for him are "relatively permanent" deeper structures (such as for example class or productive relations) and "conjunctural" features, which "appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental" (Gramsci 1971:177). Although there may be a sense from this that conjunctural features are less significant than organic relations, Gramsci's key insight is to give them greater weighting than more conventional Marxist accounts:

> the conjuncture can be defined as the set of circumstances which determine the market in a given phase, provided that these are conceived of as being in movement, i.e. as constituting a process of ever-changing combinations, a process which is the economic cycle. (ibid.)

As with much of Gramsci's writings, tying the conjuncture down more precisely is difficult, particularly in its relation to organic forces. Hall tends to treat neoliberalism as an ongoing conjunctural episode of continuing crises and instability rather than a more settled and resolved political-economic phase of capital accumulation and governance (e.g. Hall 2011). For Gramsci, the term is used in several different contexts although it is clear that a conjunctural moment can be an elastic one, even stretching over many decades.[4]

For our current purposes, conjunctural thinking is useful ontologically for theorising dynamic political and economic relations in key moments of crisis and transition; the relations between immediate events and deeper long-term currents. It can be usefully applied in a wider range of contexts; to social, cultural, and even ecological forces and processes, as much as the narrow political-economic framing that Gramsci originally had in mind. As Hall suggests, a conjunctural analysis can be taken "in a broader, more methodological way: as a way of marking significant transitions between different political moments; that is to say, to apply it as a general system of analysis to any historical situation" (Hall and Massey 2010:58). Hall famously subjects the rise of Thatcherism to a conjunctural analysis; as a political project that successfully fuses together a shifting constellation of economic and social forces in response to the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state in the 1970s. Thatcher and a section of the British political elite constructed an effective alliance of social classes to overturn post-war social democracy, defeating the UK's labour movement, and launching the neoliberal revolution.

Thus, a conjunctural approach draws attention to the shifting terrain of political economy, not just in terms of how immediate and short-term events and moments interact with longer-term processes, but also the sense in which through conjunctures the terrain itself (and by implication deeper organic currents) changes, with critical implications both theoretically and politically. For Gramsci, it is in the conjunctural terrain on which the "forces of opposition [must] organise" (1971:178) against the status quo and the established order; fashioning a politics that intimately understands and is able to take advantage of the specificities of the conjuncture. Too often, the left is busy fighting the last war, whilst the right and forces of capital, untroubled by ideological purity, reassemble. Coming to terms with Gramsci's "ever-changing combinations" is crucial. "When a conjuncture unrolls there is no 'going back'. History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment. You have to attend 'violently' ... to the discipline of the conjuncture" (Hall 1988:162).

Deploying a conjunctural analysis to the ongoing mutation of neoliberalism allows us to examine its contradictions and tensions and how these are then played out through the interaction of economic forces with political action and how this changes the composition of social relations themselves (see for example Peck and Theodore 2019).

We regard remunicipalisation as a key moment in a broader conjunctural crisis of neoliberalism, emerging in the early 2000s as a response to the failings of privatisation. It is one moment among many—other obvious ones being the financial crisis and the current coronavirus pandemic—that are leading to a questioning of the dominant regime of global neoliberal governance that has held

sway since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Unlike Hall, we would regard neoliberalism as a dominant regime of governance rather than an always transitional conjuncture in itself. It is an active global (if variegated) regime of market regulation, though never a stable one, given its many contradictions in reconciling exchange value and use value (see Neilsen 2020). While it would be premature to proclaim a new post-neoliberal regime emerging—and we are suspicious of too readily imposing broad brush regime analysis to diverse spatial and temporal configurations—remunicipalisation has the potential to challenge not only neoliberal governance processes but also deeper underlying organic features of capitalist social relations (Wright 2019). This is because its emergence illuminates the central contradiction between profit/exchange value on the one hand, and use value/basic social needs on the other.

We would also recognise the multiple determinations, temporalities, and dynamics at work in the current conjuncture (Clarke 2019), such that this neoliberal governance crisis is also entwined with an ecological crisis (which neoliberal marketised solutions are perpetuating rather than resolving), and a crisis of political and democratic legitimacy (in part produced by neoliberal globalisation and deregulation with consequent social and spatial inequalities). This in turn is fuelling the rise of extreme nationalisms around the world with a sense of alienation from the political-economic mainstream (Hart 2020). Conjunctural analysis draws attention to the open-ended nature of a crisis which can lead to a transformation in underlying social relations but also to a more "passive revolution" where "none of the social forces are able to enforce their political will and things go stumbling along in an unresolved way" (Hall and Massey 2010:57).

As recent work has suggested, Gramsci's conjunctural analysis, and indeed his broader revolutionary theory and method, have a "rich spatial sensibility" (Ekers and Loftus 2013:16). Adding a critical geographical lens enables us to think spatially about how complex relations and determinations come together in conjunctures. Massey, for example, has always been insistent to see places as diverse, and relationally connected to each other—rather than territorial closed entities—while always in the process of social construction (Massey 2005). This reinforces the importance of also situating places temporally, shaped by past relations, structures, and constellations—most evident in her geological metaphor of layering in her classic text, *Spatial Divisions of Labour* (Massey 1984).

Hart's global conjunctural frame is useful here, too, for thinking about key political moments (in her case the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a triumphant neoliberal capitalism) "when interconnected forces at play at multiple levels and spatial scales in different regions of the world have come together to create new conditions with worldwide implications …" (Hart 2020:242). She uses this to construct a nuanced understanding of how successful populist nationalist movements in India, the US, and South Africa are both the product of particularist historical determinations but also wider, shared although different configurations of capitalism, state developmentalism, and colonialism.

Drawing on Massey and Hart, a more explicit spatial lens allows us to understand the changing geography of relations between places as new conjunctures unfold; the spatial imprint of particular political discourses and strategies which

both emerge out of particular places but also are connected to broader already existing spatial flows. Political discourses themselves become spatialised, notably in how political responses to the financial crisis across Europe on the left and right have displayed "nationed narratives" (Featherstone and Karaliotas 2018:295) that in different ways have accentuated social and spatial divisions, exacerbating racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and xenophobia.

Methodologically, Peck (2017) has recently coined the term "conjunctural urbanism" for how we deal with spatial variation in neoliberal mutations, moving from the abstract to the more concrete in understating processes of change that are attentive to local particularities but not reducible to them. In other words, an awareness of the spatially variegated shifting terrain of the conjuncture in the way that deeper structural—and in Gramsci's sense organic—processes (e.g. commodification, marketisation, and financialisaton) and forces play out differently, interacting with diverse trajectories, but also with how places are situated within broader spatial relations. This enables us to map how different multiple determinations of organic forces (e.g. climate change, colonialism, capitalist economic relations) come together in particular moments as crises or ruptures from which particular spatially inflected conjunctures emerge.

The Dynamic and Spatially Variegated Terrain of the Remunicipalisation Moment

To consider remunicipalisation conjuncturally involves recognising it as a particular moment in the mutation of broader neoliberal governance processes. Given its scale and reach as a global process, remunicipalisation has a shared set of commonalities that are also located within particular spatial and socio-political trajectories. On the one hand, as noted above, its existence reveals a common global "Polanyian" systemic push back against the over-commodification of public services, privatisation, and marketisation (Hall et al. 2013; Warner and Clifton 2014). On the other hand, such shared processes are always entwined with diverse spatially situated political-economic relations (Ong 2007), for example the failure of state socialist modernisation agendas in parts of the global South (e.g. Tanzania), continuing legacies of colonialism and racism (e.g. Bolivia), the return to liberal democracy after dictatorship (e.g. Argentina, Brazil), or a rejuvenated right-wing assault on the post-1945 Keynesian settlement (e.g. UK, US).

As spatially embedded and variegated processes, privatisations are themselves acts of situated political economy, rather than the rolling out of some global neoliberal blueprint. In the UK, Thatcherism was an extreme case, where full privatisation of much of the public realm was enabled by the decades long, ongoing centralisation of the state (Cumbers 2012). Elsewhere, privatisations were often more restricted, either part-privatisations where states still held controlling stakes (e.g. France, Norway), or franchising models of contracting out services for limited periods (e.g. France, Germany, the US). Or, in many parts of Latin America, short-lived incursions of foreign capital at the behest of the IMF/World Bank and local elites, but hopelessly desensitised to local conditions and political subjectivities (e.g. Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay).

Remunicipalisation thus emerges as its own spatially differentiated moment of neoliberal mutation. A common denominator in remunicipalisation struggles is the rising cost of privatisation, accompanied by poor performance (Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017). Linked to this, a second common thread, is the failure of the private corporate world to deliver the promised investment to revitalise the public realm. Remunicipalisation is, in this sense, an observable but substantial empirical phenomenon that is part of neoliberalism's "moving matrix of articulations" (Peck and Theodore 2019:247) in the way that it interacts on an ongoing basis with diverse other political-economic trajectories. It has certain common features reflecting the political over-reach of commodification processes (associated with the neoliberal political project) and their inherent contradictions, as marketised values come into sharp conflict with the basic social reproductive needs of citizens and collectively the everyday functioning of municipal life. But, as a variegated moment of neoliberal mutation, it also intersects with "actually existing" forms of politico-economic governance that are diversely and relationally situated within broader multi-scalar modes of governance.

To illustrate briefly here, we can consider remunicipalisation from its emergence in ltwo national settings (see Table 1).[5] The cases have been chosen based on their "different positioning" (Peck 2017) in relation to multiple but diverse spatial-historical determinations and processes of deprivatisation and remunicipalisation as explored below. While we are alert to the problems of "conceptual and methodological nationalism", we have chosen national comparators, although set firmly within a multi-scalar framing (Table 1), because of the continuing importance of national state level institutions and socio-political relations in framing and shaping municipal action.

Argentina's Left Pivot Away From Privatisation

Argentina was the scene of some of the earliest remunicipalisations, notably in the water sector where there were eight cases at the city or provincial level between 2002 and 2010, including the capital, Buenos Aires, its surrounding districts and wider region, and two of the other three largest metropolitan areas, Mendoza and Rosario-Santa Fe (Transnational Institute 2020). A further remunicipalisation—of the gas distribution company Metrogas in the Buenos Aires region —was undertaken in 2013. Alongside these developments, there were also subsequent re-nationalisations of the country's postal service, its national airline, pension and welfare funds, and the railway, following a tragic train crash in which 51 people died.

These remunicipalisations have been "top-down" affairs, overseen by national or provincial state authorities (Colbert 2017). In the case of the city of Buenos Aires, for example, the private water concession was both awarded and then cancelled by the national government, with the new public water company (Agua y Saneamientos Argentinos; AySA) under national state control (Azpiazu and Castro 2012). There were no explicit local grassroots mobilisations or social movement coalitions, although some neighbourhood assemblies were active in protests against privatisation in Buenos Aires. All remunicipalisations were, though, political

Table 1: Theorising remunicipalisation in conjunctural terms: The illustrative cases of Argentina and Germany

	Argentina	Germany
Empirical aspects of remunicipalisation	Some of earliest cases of push-back against privatisation in water sector combined with re-nationalisation in other sectors	Most significant epicentre of remunicipalisation (primarily in energy but some water and other local municipal services). New public enterprises and cooperatives linked to remunicipalisation process
Broader + relational political economy, evolution and legacies	Washington Consensus imposed neoliberal economic reforms under Menem, preceded by incomplete developmental state + capitalist modernisation, and legacies of colonialism, Peronism, dictatorship	Adoption of EU Single Market logics 1992 onwards, gradual erosion of Social Europe + West European "variety of capitalism"
National/local "conjunctural" forces	Mass privatisation early 1990s, financial crisis, shift to left, and a more statist Peronism under Kirchnerismo, including significant renationalisations	Partial neoliberal reforms including privatisations in 1990s but uneven across decentred polity. "Energiwende" involving new political mobilisations at local and national scales
Social and spatial politics of remunicipal moment	Heavily centralised state, some provincial autonomy. Clientalist relations in municipal governance. Strong trade unions but little exercise of genuine economic democracy	Federal system + strong local autonomy enabling municipal pushback v privatisation, local experimentation. Predominantly state managerialism but with some constitutional institutions of direct democracy allowing possibilities for grassroots political mobilisation (e.g. through referenda)
Extent of democratic engagement and participation	Dominant managerialist form, little effective transparency, or citizen engagement but emergence of significant broader autonomous movements in opposition to neoliberalism and linked to broader new municipalist movement (e.g. Rosario)	New community led forms of ownership and hybrid cooperative models especially in rural areas; radical democratic and egalitarian models proposed (e.g. Berlin, Hamburg)

responses to the failings of privatisation echoed elsewhere: poor service delivery, increased costs, lack of infrastructure investment and modernisation.

Argentina was at the epicentre of Latin American resistance and push back to neoliberal policies, having earlier been a willing pupil of Washington Consensus-style economic modernisation and opening up the country to foreign capital (particularly foreign multinationals in water privatisations) prior to its economic collapse in 2001. Some of the same political forces within the state and civil society that supported neoliberal reforms ended up opposing them as grassroots political

resistance mobilised against their pernicious effects. In particular, mass privatisation under Carlos Menem and his liberal economic brand of Peronism during the 1990s gave way in the 2000s to the more left populist Peronism of Kirchnerismo under Néstor Carlos Kirchner and his successor Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

The repositioning of national political elites within broader global economic discourses and relations is notable. From being the poster child of neoliberal globalisation under Menemismo, Kirchner and Fernandez de Kirchner evoked a much more nationalistic economic posture, including a legal struggle with international regulators, financial institutions, and foreign multinationals over the terms of renationalisation, amidst demands for compensation for private operators such as French water utility Suez and the now defunct American corporation, Enron. While signalling Kirchnerismo's willingness to be sticking up for Argentine interests and surf with the Latin American "pink tide" against "Western imperialism", the regime was at the same time careful not to ostracise all foreign investment that might detract from macroeconomic stabilisation and an export-driven industrial strategy (Wylde 2011).

The trade unions were incorporated into many privatisations with various financial inducements; in the water sector by the promise of a ten per cent shareholding in privatised companies (Loftus and McDonald 2001; Murillo 1997), a somewhat limited exercise in economic democracy. Job losses and deteriorating working conditions from privatisation produced a fault line within the labour movement between union leaders, employees, and those made unemployed, who became part of broader anti-privatisation campaigns and the broader mobilisations against neoliberalism, notably the Unemployment Workers Movement (Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados or MTD) (see Dinerstein 2007, 2015). The subsequent creation of new worker and social movement organisations forced a response by state elites to both accommodate but also incorporate these new forces (Dinerstein 2007). With the various de-privatisations, this led to the ditching of profit-centred tariffs, greater state regulation of public services, but little effective transparency, accountability, or participation of citizens in the newly created public entities (Azpiazu and Castro 2012; Lobina 2017).

These state-led remunicipalisations can be seen as part of a successful elite political strategy to the localised conjuncture of neoliberal crisis. The shift from Menemismo to Kirchnerismo represents an adaptation to the changing neoliberal moment across Latin America, and in particular a departure from deregulated, market-driven governance towards greater state intervention, social welfare policies, some limited (given return of control to national state bodies in the main) encouragement of greater local autonomy and resources for social movements, while still being open to global processes and capital (Dinerstein 2015; Grugel and Riggirozzi 2012; Wylde 2011; Yates and Bakker 2014). In other words, a narrative that was attentive to the shifting terrain and changing political moment of post-crisis Argentinian political economy (Hall 1988), although ultimately one with its own democratic limitations, tensions, and contradictions, as subsequent events, notably renewed economic problems and the return of a right-wing neoliberal inclined government in 2015, demonstrated.

Germany's Incomplete Neoliberalism as Fertile Terrain for Remunicipalisation

Germany has witnessed the largest global "cluster" of remunicipalisations; 411 out of the 1,408 remunicipalisations (29.2 %) identified by TNI (Kishimoto et al. 2020), with energy by far the dominant sector (305 cases). Unlike Argentina, German remunicipalisation has largely been a "bottom-up" affair, reflecting both grassroots mobilisations but also action by local state elites as we shall elaborate more fully below. But there are other important differences which reflect the temporal and spatial particularities of German political economy and its interaction with neoliberalism.

The "organic" composition of German ordoliberalism (see Bonefeld 2012), while having some "family resemblances" (Peck 2013:143), has always had key differences to its Anglo-American neoliberal cousins, being more concerned with fiscal prudence and restricting monopoly control (Peck 2010) than with defending "the right of private capital to grow the business" (Hall with Schwarz 2017:319), a context that explains the German political elite's support for the European Single Market project (Table 1). Despite this, privatisation was never the full-throttled version developed elsewhere. This is, in part, because the country's decentralised, federal political system, with its complex and multi-layered set of constitutional responsibilities for social provision (Cumbers and Becker 2018), precludes the kind of neoliberal capture of governance institutions experienced in more centralised states. Although it underwent its own wave of privatisations in the 1990s, alongside the incursion of new public management into the public sector (Wissen and Naumann 2006), important elements of Germany's social market economy have remained intact, including the core belief that (state) intervention in the market is necessary where public and individual well-being are concerned, with legal frameworks to support this.

In this respect, a critical municipal mandate is the "Daseinsvorsorge"—broadly translated as the state's obligation to provide citizens with essential public services that cannot be acquired through the market. Under the German constitution, these rights are decentralised with municipalities having responsibility to deliver. Private actors can run services but cannot assume full ownership (as in the UK) because of these obligations. To this end, local privatisations tended to be on a time-limited basis of concessions or franchises. Reflecting Hall's (2011) adage that that neoliberalism is never complete, Germany's decentralised and continuing (albeit eroded) social market economy has thus provided a particularly fertile terrain for its unravelling. As private concessions have expired or come up for renewal—in the face of the same poor performance experienced elsewhere—many local municipal governments have quietly and pragmatically taken these services back into public ownership.

But this quieter local elite politics of remunicipalisation has fused with a "noisier" set of mobilisations from below, which demonstrate new political "combinations" in a Gramscian sense. In the first place, the German Energiewende—the country's political consensus towards a rapid energy transition away from fossil fuels—has been a critical national conjunctural element in the country's remunicipalisation trend. Given the estimated €25–€42 billion needed in infrastructure

spending to realise the country's climate change obligations, remunicipalisation initiatives have provided an important vehicle for grassroots campaigners and local politicians to come together to take back ownership and control of the energy sector in the face of inaction from the established private utilities with their carbon-based interests (Cumbers and Becker 2018). Second, the Energie-wende itself, far from being a top-down state elite project has been driven by a large activist civil society of grassroots and autonomous movements that dates back to the 1960s (Paul 2018) and has been renewed by subsequent cycles of green and anti-capitalist activism, more recently in the Fridays for Future move-ment (Hunger and Hutter 2020). These movements have also been instrumental in the massive growth (with 812 established since 2006) of new renewal energy cooperatives, particularly in rural areas, and often with local state support (Cum-bers 2016).

Third, Germany's remunicipalisation conjuncture is situated within a broader set of alternative political imaginaries that are contesting neoliberal governance at the local and urban scales. The celebrated cases of Berlin and Hamburg energy remunicipalisation campaigns were initiated by grassroots left-green coalitions which included a variety of NGOs and housing tenants' movements as part of articulating broader social and ecological visions, strongly rooted in "right to the city" discourses and firmly embedded within other campaigns around housing, land occupation, and anti-fossil fuel protests (Cumbers and Becker 2018). For Ber-lin, this was articulated in a much more democratic form of public enterprise underpinned by strong social justice obligations (Becker et al. 2015). In both cases, opposition came from Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties, powerful privatised utilities, and fossil fuel-based trade unions. Nor are such mobilisations confined to the cities. One well-known example is the small Hessen town of Wolfhagen where a local citizen-led campaign successfully challenged multinational energy utility Eon in 2006 to take back control of its electricity grid and establish a public energy company (including a 25% owned citizen coopera-tive) with the aim to decarbonise its energy system with its own renewable energy supplies (Cumbers 2016).

Fourth, grassroots mobilisations reflect "recombinatory" strategies (see Kipfer 2013) that deploy existing state institutional mechanisms back against local politi-cal elites. This is most evident in the use of referenda against privatisation (e.g. Leipzig) and for remunicipalisation (e.g. Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen, and Stuttgart) using established state institutions of decentralised governance and direct democ-racy (some of which go back to the origins of the Federal Republic in the late 1940s) to promote radical environmental and pro-public discourses.

The spatial politics of Germany's remunicipalisation is nevertheless highly varie-gated and sometimes more ambivalent. Small towns and rural municipalities, in traditionally conservative rural strongholds of southern Germany in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, have witnessed some of the largest clusters of remunicipali-sation (Wagner and Berlo 2017), where environmental campaigns often fuse with more mainstream economic development aspirations to generate local green jobs and tax revenues, preventing "leakage" from the regional economy. At the same time, the pro-public municipalisms evident here need to be couched against a

continuing neoliberal discourse and policy environment at national and EU scales, and imperatives to privatise among national political elites have not gone away.

Conclusion

While not underestimating the extent of the challenges and tensions faced, the global remunicipalisation trend does represent an important moment and potential opportunity for the left. As neoliberalism falters, mutates but always seems to "fail forward" (Peck et al. 2012:274; see also Peck and Theodore 2019), the resurgence of local forms of public ownership in opposition to privatisation is a reminder of how alternative politics and new mobilisations do emerge at the local scale despite continuing neoliberal elite hegemony at national and international levels. Avoiding an overly-optimistic prognosis (McDonald and Swyngedouw 2019; Warner and Aldag 2019), we would emphasise here its open-ended and politically generative character (Featherstone 2013).

Instead, we have argued for a dynamic perspective on remunicipalisation, to recognise it as a more fluid set of political and social relations, a terrain of contestation and one which can lead to new configurations and political alliances, but which could be regressive or progressive in content. With that in mind, our deployment of a Gramscian conjunctural approach enables an open-ended and productive enquiry that interrogates remunicipalisation processes in time and space.

Temporally, as part of the mutation of neoliberalism—and underlying organic political and economic forces—the global trend in remunicipalisation represents both a broader systemic pushback against privatisation, but also an uncertain conjunctural political moment where many pathways are possible as the neoliberal terrain shifts. By attending spatially too to the "violence" of the remunicipal moment, we are able to interrogate how remunicipalisation in particular places (here the illustrative cases of Argentina and Germany) meshes and recombines with particular local political-economic trajectories to generate new political configurations. In Argentina, remunicipalisation has largely been a project of state elites, though in part a response to grassroots mobilisations against the excesses of 1990s neoliberalism and privatisation. In Germany, it is a combination of state action fused with grassroots mobilisation. Partly economic pragmatism by local state actors for whom remunicipalisation is about re-capturing vital revenue generating assets to fund local services, but also elements of a more democratic and socially inclusive municipalism underpinned by a strong environmental politics to tackle climate change. A conjunctural approach is, in this regard, distinctive to many other forms of critical political economy analysis. It allows both a more fluid and dynamic sense of critical moments and turning points in a mutating landscape of neoliberalism, but also charts how new political and social combinations emerge out of variegated and shifting terrains of municipal governance.

While our approach here has centred upon two national cases, reflecting what we see as the continuing centrality of the national state as a key container of regulation and institutional power, we acknowledge the importance of both a multi-scalar lens and a relational understanding to advancing a geographical conjunctural analysis. Although space precludes more substantial discussion here, it is critical to embed

and situate remunicipalisation experiences within broader spatial contexts of political-economic governance from the 1980s onwards; in Argentina, a reaction to Washington Consensus-inspired privatisations, and Germany's experiences within the broader neoliberal momentum of the EU Single Market programme. While it is important to recognise locally differentiated processes (also within nation states, as the German case in particular evidences) in the remunicipalisation phenomenon, they remain intimately connected to and imbricated by broader spatial discourses, movements, and relations (Massey 2005). In this sense, our approach is also closely aligned to Hart's (2020) global conjunctural framework where spatial comparison allows us to understand how Gramsci's "multiple relations and determinations" both come together in particular places but are at the same time shaped by "their interconnections with articulations of difference" (Hart 2020:257–258).

For left political strategy, conjunctural analysis allows us to avoid the pitfalls of either a naïve optimism or a world-weary fatalism. It alerts us to the interactions between organic and conjunctural social forces in particular places and their implications. To be sure, there is nothing inherently progressive about remunicipalisation; both Germany and Argentina demonstrate the potential for centrist elites at local and national levels to use it to adapt pragmatically to a changing terrain of governance. There are also opportunities for a resurgent far-right to seize the mantle of the "public" and steer it in more exclusionary directions. To forestall this, a left municipal politics needs to transform local state spaces, challenging existing forms while articulating more radical, participatory, and egalitarian visions co-produced by the coming together of a plurality of pro-public movements. But it also needs to work "with the grain" of diverse existing local municipal experiences and trajectories (see Cumbers and Paul 2020)—something Gramsci was all too aware of with his invocation for the left to render "coherent otherwise fragmentary common sense rather than making reality 'confirm to [an] abstract schema'" (Kipfer and Hart 2013:338). Remunicipalisation campaigns, which emerge out of the everyday but diverse local politics of social reproduction and a faltering neoliberalism, surely have much to offer a transformative and democratic left project?

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Endnotes
[1] PSIRU is part funded by the global trade union federation Public Services International as part of their efforts to resist privatisation and argues for pro-public solutions.

[2] See the recent (December 2019) global public ownership conference hosted by TNI in Amsterdam (https://futureispublic.org/ [last accessed 5 June 2020]). Two other important contributors to this network are WeOwnIt in the UK (https://weownit.org.uk/) and the New York-based Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED; http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/). It also includes supportive key politicians such as the former Deputy Mayor of Paris, Anne Le Straat, and the former Shadow Chancellor of the UK, John McDonnell.
[3] One example from the UK is the pressure group WeOwnIt, established in 2013 to lobby for public ownership and against profit driven privatisation (https://weownit.org.uk/about-us [last accessed 10 June 2020]).
[4] He contrasts what he sees as an unstable and mutating conjuncture in France following the 1789 revolution through the century of political upheaval to the bloody resolution of the Paris Commune and the resolution of a properly established bourgeois state in the Third Republic from 1870. Whether he would have made the same assessment had he lived to see the collapse of that republic and the descent into fascism in 1940 is moot.
[5] There is not the space here for an extensive overview of global trends. This has been undertaken elsewhere (see Pearson et al. 2021).

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