

REMUNICIPALISATION, MUTATING NEOLIBERALISM AND THE CONJUNCTURE

Andrew Cumbers and Franziska Paul

Adam Smith Business School

University of Glasgow

Conceptual Working Paper, Global Remunicipalisation Project,*
August 2020

Abstract

There is a growing interest in left and progressive circles in the radical potential of remunicipalisation. This refers to a global trend, evident particularly since 2000, for towns, cities and even subnational regions to take formerly privatised assets and services back into public ownership. In this paper, we offer a new conceptualisation of remunicipalisation, developing a conjunctural perspective through critical engagement with the work of Stuart Hall and Gramsci and recent geographical scholarship. 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 left projects against a backdrop of global economic, social and ecological crisis.

Keywords:

Remunicipalisation, Neoliberalism, Mutation, Conjecture, Democratic Publics

* We acknowledge the support of the European Research Council for funding the research project behind this paper 'GLOBALMUN: Global Remunicipalisation and The Post - Neoliberal Turn' (Grant Agreement 789100).

Introduction

There is a growing interest on the left in the phenomenon of remunicipalisation¹ (e.g. Becker et al 2015, Cumbers and Becker 2018, McDonald 2018). This is a process, particularly 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. It is a global process; taking place on all continents but geographically uneven with particular strong concentrations evident in Germany, the United States and France (Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017, Kishimoto et al 2020). Clearly, it is an interesting political phenomenon as a universal pushback against privatisation as one of the central tenets of neoliberal governance and hegemony, raising important questions about its radical and democratic potential.

Although there is an emerging literature on remunicipalisation, in activist and NGO circles, cataloguing its emergence (e.g. Pigeon et al 2012, Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017, Kishimoto et al 2020), academic literature has thus far been confined to case study based approaches and country or sector specific analyses, particularly in water and energy (e.g. Becker et al 2015, Cumbers and Becker 2018, Wagner and Berlo 2017, Cumbers 2016, McDonald 2018, Aldag et al 2019, Warner 2008, Popartan et al 2020). What these studies reveal, is that remunicipalisation is spatially diverse, whilst at the same time having certain common properties or ‘family resemblances’.

As a global urban and local phenomenon, remunicipalisation currently lacks a critical analytical overview to interrogate its wider significance as a system-wide pushback against privatisation and neoliberalism. In this context, the aim of this paper is to critically assess the potential for the remunicipalisation process to contribute towards a more egalitarian transformative politics at the local scale. 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 different geographical settings.

In developing our conceptual analysis here, following Stuart Hall’s heavily Gramscian inspired insights (e.g. Hall 1979, 1988, 2011), we develop a ‘conjunctural’ approach to remunicipalisation which develops an interpretation of change that cannot just be read off mechanistically from longer term processes and underlying social forces but must also be attentive to the fluid social and political currents and eddies of particular confluences, temporal and spatial circumstances. The paper proceeds by initially outlining empirically the emergence of remunicipalisation as a global trend. We then critically assess the existing literature and knowledge about remunicipalisation, before developing our own conceptualisation through a Gramscian inspired lens, drawing on the work of the late Stuart Hall and others, to envisage the phenomenon of remunicipalisation as part of a new political-economic conjuncture. In doing so, we recognise both the variegated spatial and historical contexts within which remunicipalisation is situated, and in particular the diverse trajectories of neoliberal-inflected governance, as well as the open-ended and fluid relational politics that characterise conjunctures. While not being naïve about its more radical and democratic potential, this allows us to highlight the progressive potential of remunicipalisation as a

project to create new publics for the common good against the marketised imperatives of privatisation and neoliberalism.

Global remunicipalisation: a developing trend in urban and local governance

In 2017, the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute (TNI),² published a landmark report documenting, globally, 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). This ‘remunicipalisation’ process is not just a global phenomenon but has been evident across different sectors (water, energy, waste, local government, transport, education, and health and social services). It has been 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 (at the time of writing in June 2020) (Kishimoto et al 2020), with 924 cases of de-privatisation, i.e. the remunicipalisation of privatised services, and 484 cases of new public enterprises being established, so called municipalisation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 here

Like many apparently global phenomena that are associated with wider processes of political and economic governance, remunicipalisation is a spatially diverse and highly variegated phenomenon. Decisions to reverse privatisation typically reflect a set of commonly experienced problems around poor performance, escalating costs and lack of promised infrastructure improvements, melding with particular spatial contexts and trajectories as well as diverse sets of scalar relations between local administrations, national and sometimes transnational actors such as multinational corporations, financial institutions and global governance organisations such as the IMF and World Bank. As a spatial phenomenon, it is highly uneven, shifting between places, different actors and sectors through time; in this sense reflecting the variegated nature of ‘actually existing’ neoliberal inspired privatisations (Brenner and Theodore 2002, Peck and Tickell 2002, Brenner et al 2010), and the pushback against them.

Initially its emergence as a major trend was captured by the Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU), a research group which is part funded by the global trade union federation Public Services International at the University of Greenwich. PSIRU carried out a long programme of detailed and systematic analysis, for over a decade, charting the growing resistances to water privatisation but also the social mobilisation by activists, NGOs and trade unions around these initiatives, and the re-emergence of public alternatives (e.g. Bayliss and Hall 2000, Hall and Lobina 2007, Lobina and Hall 2013).

Remunicipalisation gained wider public attention first in Latin America where governments of left, centre and right were enthusiastic proponents of privatisation, from the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile in the 1970s but spreading across the continent in the 1990s in particular, under pressure from the Washington Consensus institutions to modernise and marketise infrastructure in water and energy services in particular. In response to these widespread privatisations and their poor service delivery, social movement coalitions successfully organised pushback campaigns in the early 2000s. Most celebrated were Bolivia’s ‘water wars’ that saw the privatised water contracts terminated and new municipal water

companies set up in La Paz and Cochabamba. But these were part of a bigger retreat of foreign private capital and multinationals, especially from Europe and North America from the continent, catalogued as early as 2005, in the face of failed promises to modernise and invest, rising prices, poor services, growing public resistance and falling profits (Lobina and Hall 2007). Similar developments occurred across the continent including five remunicipalisation cases in Argentina, two in Colombia and elsewhere private contracts terminated in Brazil, Venezuela and a full renationalisation of water services in Uruguay (Lobina and Hall 2013).

The trend towards remunicipalisation in the water sector spread outwards across both global south and global north, from two cases identified in 2000 to 235 by 2015 (Lobina 2015) where similar experiences of poor service outcome and failed investment promises led municipalities to terminate or refuse to renew private sector contracts; a trend that has stretched from Johannesburg to Berlin and Paris to Odessa, Dar Es Salaam and Samarkand (Lobina and Hall 2013, Kishimoto et al 2015). France has witnessed the largest wave of water remunicipalisation, where 106 cases are recorded by TNI although this might be the tip of the iceberg as it is suspected that the real figure could be double this amount (Petitjean 2017). Also notable is a widespread trend in the US for cities and towns to take back control of their water and waste disposal services following poor experiences with private contractors (see Warner and Clifton 2014, Warner and Aldag 2019) with 61 cases identified by TNI including major metropolises such as New York, Atlanta and Houston (Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017).

Privatisation's problems have notably also manifested themselves in the energy sector, particularly in Germany, where in the 1990s, and under pressure from EU market liberalisation processes, many 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, many municipalities have chosen to take 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 as contracts have ended or in some cases been terminated after public campaigns and successful social mobilisations (see below). Other notable recent developments have been the trend for UK local authorities (55 cases identified by TNI) 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) with another interesting trend being the cancelling of private out-sourced contracts in health and social care in Nordic countries; for example Norway has recorded 18 cases (Kishimoto et al 2020).

Defining remunicipalisation

As a concept, the term 'remunicipalisation' first emerged from studies in the water sector that were mapping the trend. Because water services are almost always organised at local or at least sub-national regional scales, remunicipalisation is an appropriate term although in some cases, particularly in the global south, it is often the national government that owns and control local and regional public water supply. A commonly accepted definition from the water sector is:

“the return of previously privatised water supply and sanitation services to public service delivery. More precisely, remunicipalisation is the passage of water services from privatisation in any of its various forms – including private ownership of assets,

outsourcing of services, and public-private partnerships (PPPs) – to full public ownership, management and democratic control.” (Lobina 2015, p. 7)

The term is more difficult to transfer meaningfully to other sectors, where the organisational logistics are different and where there is often a separation of ownership spatially and organisationally between different elements of a service or utility; for example in the energy sector where the electricity grid, power generation, supply and distribution can be organised at different scales and sometimes across jurisdictions. Similarly, in transport, especially rail, where a national network (usually but not always owned by a public operator supervised by national government) typically co-exists with a diversity of public and private train operators. While Lobina offers a clear definition, it does not capture instances of partial remunicipalisation, where the public sector takes back some ownership and control but the private sector remains involved. Theoretically and politically, however, these instances are also of interest in charting a broader shift in economic and political governance at the subnational level away from privatised and marketized forms.

Another important definitional issue is how the use of language reflects different spatial and cultural traditions of governance. For example, the German term for remunicipalisation is ‘Rekommunalisierung’ which literally means re-communalisation, where the sense of a communal (i.e. togetherness) of citizens is interchangeable with the term ‘municipal’. This also signifies that local elected political actors are charged with responsibility for integrated public control of key assets and infrastructures (Becker et al 2015).³ This affords considerable local autonomy, and the ability to cross-subsidise different aspects of the municipal economy; for example using revenue from utilities to fund transport, kindergartens and leisure services. The German public governance system is thus very different, for example, to that of the UK where, since 1945, there has not been a strong tradition of integrated local public service capacity alongside varying scales of governance jurisdiction in an overall context where many of the utilities have been centralised or regionalised (Cumbers 2012). It is also very different to many parts of the global south, notably Latin America, where local public services such as water have often been under national state control. The point to make here more broadly is that spatial variation and local context matter in the interpretation of remunicipalisation.

Due to the apparent fuzziness of the term, ‘de-privatisation’ might be an alternative concept to remunicipalisation, but we feel that the former is a broader concept that fails to capture a distinctive ‘localness’ that is evident here in the revival of public ownership. The Oxford English Dictionary refers to a municipality as “a town, city or district with its own local government; the group of officials who govern it”; a definition that usefully captures the sense of a sub-national or local internal territorial service provision as distinct from national level governance functions - such as macroeconomic governance, defence, strategic infrastructures, immigration or air travel - and the inherently local dimension of these relations of governance, between citizens, political actors and varying shades of the local state. Municipalities can be urban phenomena but they also include small towns and rural districts, while also in some countries involving regional authorities above the immediate local level who are responsible for some aspects of basic service provision (e.g. Thames Water or Scottish Water in the UK context or Santa Fe province in Argentina).

For us, remunicipalisation captures the essence of a particular component of neoliberal governance failure at sub-national scales in relation to basic service provision (water, energy

and waste services) as well as, increasingly, additional services such as education and 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. Despite its vagaries, remunicipalisation is the appropriate term for interpreting the desire for greater public control at the scale of everyday life, used in a slightly looser way to include the diverse forms and organisational varieties (including partial ownership) of a new wave of local public ownership. If we think of remunicipalisation as a broader process, rather than concrete and distinctive organisational entities, we would also include the many emerging examples of new local public entities that have been created in recent years. These are ‘municipalisations’ that have emerged, reflecting the failings of privatised entities to create the new organisational and infrastructural forms necessary to tackle emergent public policy priorities, most evidently, the climate emergency or to facilitate the emergent digital economy.

Interrogating remunicipalisation: between political advocacy and critical debate

The literature on remunicipalisation developed initially in activist circles. The term emerged through the work of various trade union and NGO organisations in their struggles against global processes of privatisation in the water sector, where it was first documented as a coherent global trend. To the best of our knowledge, remunicipalisation was coined PSIRU researchers in 2001, recording the French city Grenoble’s successful battle to reverse the privatisation of its sanitation system and water services back into public ownership (Hall and Lobina 2001, Bictin 2018). Later, water privatisation and subsequent remunicipalisations were the focus of the Municipal Services Project (funded by the Canadian SSRC), a global network of researchers, academics and activists (including TNI, PSIRU and the Corporate Europe Observatory) led by David McDonald, which has become an important advocate for alternative public models of water provision (e.g. Pigeon et al 2012, McDonald and Swyngedouw 2019).

Further work by PSIRU with EPSU (the European Public Services Union) (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 Germany energy and water sectors (e.g. Röber 2009, Hachfeld 2009, Höffler et al 2012, Libbe 2013).⁴ Perhaps the most critical actor in bringing remunicipalisation to the attention of the broader public has been TNI, whose joint work with the Corporate Europe Observatory⁵ firmly established it as a global phenomenon (Kishimoto and Petitjean 2017, Hancox 2020). There are also a number of progressive US based think tanks and advocacy groups, notably the Washington based Democracy Collaborative, and Food and Water Watch that have been cataloguing cases of remunicipalisation and public ownership in the US itself (e.g. Grant 2015, Hanna 2018).

Most of these groups are interconnected and collaborating (including with the authors of this paper), and also with supportive local and national politicians, to create a global anti-privatisation and pro-public coalition.⁶ In combination, their activities have been critical in identifying public alternatives to privatisation and advocating democratic public ownership including attempting to influence political debate and penetrate mainstream consciousness, notably in aiding the leadership of the UK Labour Party in revising its approach to public

ownership. What is also striking in this regard is the silence on remunicipalisation in more official governance discourses where its stubborn existence confronts the neoliberal policy dogma of institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, OECD and European Commission. Their refusal even to recognise the trend in official reports and papers seems to be predicated on the belief that if they ignore it, it will go away (see McDonald 2019).

Alongside the advocacy and grey literature, there is a nascent academic debate situating remunicipalisation within broader processes of political economy. One perspective has cast it 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 marketization (e.g. Hall et al 2013, Warner and Clifton 2014). 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 as a response to the failings of the liberal market economy in the 1930s makes clear (see Polanyi 2001 [1944], pp.245-256). Some of the de-privatisations in countries currently labouring under autocratic regimes, such as the recent nationalisation programme undertaken in Hungary and to a lesser extent that in Poland, can clearly be seen in this light (McDonald 2018, Kozarzewski et al 2019).

Indeed, Hall et al (2013) identify considerable political diversity and motivations in the remunicipalisation process. As noted above, while cost reductions and poor service delivery are motivations across the board, right wing and more centrist remunicipalisations tend to be driven by the prospect of revenue generation, whereas many left parties are driven by social justice and projects of radical democracy. We can also identify important environmental arguments in the context of climate change and commitments to decarbonise the energy sector at the local level, where "green parties have played a strategically important role in many cases and have mobilised both green and traditional leftist arguments." (Hall et al 2013, 207). Remunicipalisation has, therefore, spanned the political spectrum with one analysis identifying tendencies towards autocratic state capitalism, market managerialism, social democracy, socialism and autonomism (McDonald 2018).

Within this emergent academic literature, it is possible to identify two other important contributions to the debate. The first is a set of quantitative empirically driven studies of local public governance in the US and Western Europe which recognises that "remunicipalisation is an emerging and important trend, but care must be taken to explain and interpret what this development actually means." (Clifton et al 2019, 9). They rightly caution against over-hyping it both as an empirical phenomenon and progressive political project (e.g. Clifton and Warner 2020). Certainly, privatisation continues alongside remunicipalisation, not least in the post financial crisis austerity measures imposed on many governments, especially in the European Union, a fact that no serious observer would dispute.

Some authors in this field utilise quantitative data, where this exists, to analyse shifts in management models, such as a study of privatisation and reverse privatisation of waste collection in the Netherlands between 1999 and 2014 (Gradus and Budding 2018), but highlight that high quality large-scale data sets are lacking internationally. While this work is

useful in empirically mapping trends, it makes the rather startling claim – based primarily on US work but with small fragments of evidence from elsewhere (Warner and Aldag 2019, Clifton and Warner 2020, Gradus and Budding 2018, Campos-Alba et al 2020) that remunicipalisation is largely devoid of politics but rather reflects a “pragmatic market management process” by local government officials when evaluating various choices of public service delivery. What they term their “pragmatic municipalism” thesis (Warner and Aldag 2019, p. 15) – leaving aside the rather simplistic binary between pragmatism and ideology - is largely based on surveys of local government officials, where they do not detect high levels of political support for remunicipalisation (Warner and Aldag 2019). This is perhaps not surprising in a group that, by their very own public service ethos, are supposed to be politically neutral. In this sense, this body of work is rather narrowly focused around a limited selection of social actors, and a poorly defined epistemology and conceptualisation, 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. In dismissing the political and ideological aspects of remunicipalisation, such work is (unwittingly we assume) confusing the commercially driven ethos still common internally in many public authorities – not least because of neoliberalism and the influx of new public management cultures – with the broader politics of remunicipalisation. An interest in the latter leads us here to engage with it a wider social and political project that contains the possibility – though by no means certain as we detail below - for a more radical democratic transformation of the local public realm.⁷

A second and more critical left perspective is evident in a recent special issue of the journal *Water Alternatives*, edited by McDonald and Swyngedouw (2019). Whilst recognising the growing trend towards remunicipalisation in the water sector, and the desire for greater public control following the negative experiences of privatisation, they rightly caution against an overly optimistic or premature assessment of the potential for democratic transformation. Although they are clearly only able to talk authoritatively about the water sector, they do note that many de-privatisations do not in practice depart from new public management principles. They also emphasise the continuing obstacles faced by proponents of remunicipalisation, not least a continuing neo-liberal privatising ideology among supranational organisations like the World Bank, IMF and EU. They emphasise the difficulties for remunicipalisation campaigns in challenging the harsh macro-economic and geopolitical landscapes of continuing neoliberal governance and fiscal austerity, allied to powerful opposition from key institutions and organisations such as the multinational private water corporations, international financial institutions, often hostile national governments and the considerable legal hurdles to be surmounted.

McDonald and Swyngedouw also point to the increased tendency for local government to create ‘arms-length’ utilities operating without much semblance of political or democratic control; and with the same tendencies towards regressive labour restructuring as private counterparts. It is likely, too, that austerity driven cutbacks to local government since the financial crisis in many countries will have exacerbated these managerialist trends, although there is 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).

While recognising these important caveats about remunicipalisation, our emphasis here is on perceiving it as a more open, dynamic and generative set of processes and politics where “the scope of political agency is both uncertain and emergent” (Cooper 2017, 351). It can also be usefully situated within ongoing debates about a ‘new municipalism’ (Russell 2019, Thompson 2020), in the context of neoliberal urbanism and austerity, whereby grassroots and citizens movements seek to challenge local elite managerialism, whether by public or privatised interests. Central to our concerns here is the attempt to critically engage with and transform the organisations and institutions of the municipal state into more participatory spaces of citizen self-governance (Russell 2019), typified by the emergence of a global Fearless Cities movement.⁸ As one leading figure of this movement puts it: “municipalism emerges in many places precisely as a response to the lack of democracy of public institutions and traditional political parties” (Roth 2019).

Although pace the critiques made above, it is premature to read off remunicipalisation as a necessarily progressive phenomenon (see Cumbers and Paul 2020, Cumbers and Becker 2018), it is of interest especially because of its emergent, disruptive and generative politics (Featherstone 2008, 2013). In particular, remunicipalisation mobilisations have the potential to create 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.⁹ It is not a question of whether these relations are political – all social relations are underpinned by power relations – but rather what forms of alliances, mobilisation and coalitions – of every different ideological shade – emerge, change and mutate over time. This is not to ‘overhype’ or falsely proselytise the democratic and egalitarian potential of remunicipalisation – as some commentators suggest – but merely to underline that it is by its very nature contingent upon particular spatial trajectories and temporal contexts. This is where we see the merits of a conjunctural analysis influenced by the late Stuart Hall’s writings, embedded in a Gramscian perspective (e.g. Hall 1988, 2017, Grossman 2006, Jessop 2017).

A conjunctural approach to political economy transitions

In its most basic Gramscian sense, a conjunctural approach can be defined as one that pays attention to the specificities of the historical moment and does not ‘mechanistically’ read off political changes from underlying economic processes (Gramsci 1971, p. 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 structural features (such as for example class or productive relations) and “conjunctural” features, which “appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental” (ibid, p.177).

Although there may be a sense from this that conjunctural features are less significant than organic relations, Gramsci’s key insight is that:

“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 p.177).

As with much of Gramsci's writings from prison, given his battles with the censor, and subsequently the necessary ambiguities, it is often difficult to tie down terms and concepts in a stricter definitional sense. The relation between conjunctural and organic forces is one such. 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 temporally and can last for a long period, even many decades.¹⁰

Engaging further with such debates here is productive. For our current purposes, conjunctural thinking is useful ontologically for theorising dynamic social and political relations in key moments of transition; the relations between particular moments and deeper longer 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 clearly 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 makes use of a conjunctural approach to understand the rise of Thatcherism as a political project fusing successfully with a shifting constellation of economic and social forces in response to the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state in the 1970s. A more contemporary example would be the UK's current Brexit debacle as a conjunctural moment in the longer term and unresolved "organic crisis of the British state" (Jessop 2017, p.133). A brief comparison here illustrates the value of a conjunctural approach. In the Thatcherite conjuncture the political elite constructed an effective alliance of social classes to overturn post-war social democracy and fundamentally defeat the UK's labour movement, and launch the neoliberal revolution, thus to some extent resolving or (perhaps postponing) longer term crisis tendencies in the British political economy (Jessop 2017). In contrast, Brexit illustrates more than anything a conjunctural moment of deepening social and class divisions, tensions and unresolved contradictions in British political economy: "a long-running split in the establishment, a worsening representational crisis in the party system, a growing crisis of authority for political elites, a legitimacy crisis of the state, and a crisis of national-popular hegemony over the population." (Jessop 2017, 134). Faced with this situation, the 2015 Conservative Government's decision to hold a referendum in the first place and the subsequent failures to resolve the impasse are the actions of "an incapable government presiding over an ineffective state" (Jessop 2018, 1743).

Thus, a conjunctural approach here draws attention to the dynamic and shifting process of political-economic development, not just in terms of how immediate and short term events and moments interact with longer term and deeper processes, but also the sense in which through conjunctures the terrain itself shifts, with critical implications both theoretically and politically. In this sense, "knowing how to read the conjuncture is crucial" (Jessop 2016, 319) for political strategy. For Gramsci, it is in the conjunctural terrain on which the "forces of opposition [must] organize" (p.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, or broader progressive social forces are on

the back foot, or engaged in 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. As Stuart Hall memorably puts it: "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, p.162.).

There are ongoing critical debates about Hall's engagement with and use (or misuses) of Gramsci (see for example Jessop et al 1988, Hall 1985, Davidson 2008, Carley 2016) which need not detain us here. What is useful though is the way a conjunctural analysis allows us to think ontologically about the evolutionary dynamics of neoliberalism (or for that matter capitalist political economy more broadly). Thinking conjuncturally allows us to examine neoliberalism's contradictions and tensions, how these are then played out, and how their playing out through the interaction of economic forces with political action produces new and shifting terrain which can, at the same time, change the composition of the social classes and forces themselves. This can lead to a range of different social and political outcomes, both progressive and regressive, or to protracted conjunctures with no resolution, or to short term political fixes that change the terrain but do not deal with fundamentally underlying crises and contradictions. It can also lead to successful restoration of capitalism and class rule in recombinations (Peck 2019) or new combinations (as with Thatcherism) by political elites and establishments to restore order and put in place a new historical epoch or phase of capital accumulation.

Recent work in geography has begun to consider the spatial dimensions of a conjunctural analysis with its theoretical, political and methodological implications. With regard to the first two, taking their lead from the pioneering work of Doreen Massey (e.g. Massey 1984, 2005), Featherstone and Karaliotas (2018), stress the importance of engaging with the spatial politics of conjunctures. 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 networks and flows. This also allows us to understand how 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' (ibid, 295) that in different ways have accentuated social and spatial divisions, exacerbated racism, anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobia. Instead, they call for "imagining and materializing a spatial politics that moves beyond divisive and exclusionary geographies." (ibid, 300)

Methodologically, Peck has recently coined the term 'conjunctural urbanism' in getting to grips with how we deal with spatial variation in neoliberal mutations, moving from the abstract to the more concrete in understating processes of change in ways that are "attentive to issues of contextual, positional and situational specificity, resisting the temptation to read off global trends from particular circumstances." (2017, 10). This requires us to "problematise the political-economic positionality of cities, both in (inter)scalar terms and on moving landscapes of regulatory transformation." In other words, we must be attentive to 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

financialisation) and forces, play out differently, interacting with diverse trajectories, but also with how places are situating within broader spatial relations. As Peck sees it:

“conjunctural analysis calls attention to relationality and positionality, contextual and contingent effects being traced ‘all the way down’, while the location of cases themselves (both individually and collectively) is a matter not of cores and peripheries, or heartlands and hinterlands, but of uneven spatial development, heterogeneous fields, multiscalar restructuring and site-shifting dynamics.” (ibid, p.26).

Thinking conjunctures spatially in this way does not lead us into bare empiricism, an economically determinist Marxism, or a post-structural dead end that disavows underlying structures or processes, but instead should encourage us to map how different multiple determinations of organic forces (e.g. climate change, colonialism, capitalist economic relations) come together in particular moments and times as crises or ruptures from which particular spatially inflected conjunctures emerge.

The dynamic and spatially variegated terrain of the remunicipal conjuncture

To consider remunicipalisation conjunctureally involves recognising it as a particular moment in the mutation of broader and variegated neoliberal governance processes and their contradictions. Given its scale and reach as a process, it is a ‘global’ shared set of commonalities that must also be located within particular spatial and socio-political contexts and historical trajectories. On the one hand, its existence reveals a common global ‘Polanyian’ systemic push back against the over-commodification of public services, privatisation and marketisation (Warner and Clifton 2014, Hall et al 2013). On the other hand, such neoliberal processes are always spatially entwined with other, more diverse political-economic organic trajectories in different places (Ong 2007), for example the failure of state 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) and in parts of the global north with a rejuvenated right wing assault on the post 1945 Keynesian settlement (e.g. UK, US). It is important to point out that as spatially embedded and variegated processes, these privatisations are therefore ‘acts of situated political economy’ that were themselves extremely diverse in their form and content. 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 and the emasculation of local government. This was a trend going back to the 1940s and ironically accelerated by post-war nationalisation which eviscerated some forms of municipal socialism (Cumbers 2012). As privatisation has advanced and become more entrenched, it has mutated in an increasingly financialised direction, with different forms of financial innovation plied to sweat assets, rack up debt and extract shareholder value, while services have deteriorated.¹¹

Elsewhere, privatisations were often more restricted, either manifested as part-privatisations of utilities where states still held controlling stakes (e.g. France, Norway), franchising models of contracting out services for limited periods (e.g. France, Germany, US), or, in many parts of Latin America, short-lived or less stable forms applied top-down by multinational political constellations desensitised to local realities and conditions (e.g. Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay). Chile represents a different variant again; with an even more intensive privatisation process than the UK, linked to a military coup, the brutally overthrow of a democratic regime and early Chicago Boys market shock therapy.

Framed against this backdrop of variegated privatisation experiences, remunicipalisation emerges (from 2000 onwards) as its own differentiated moment of neoliberal mutation and perhaps ultimately limitation but also as a set of spatially diverse conjunctural processes, rather than a movement as is sometimes suggested (Swyngedouw and McDonald 2019, p. 323). To be clear, there are social movements and trade unions campaigning for pro-public policies (especially in the water sector) and reversing privatisation, but remunicipalisation itself is more accurately thought of as process infused with diverse, open and contested politics which play out differently along diverse spatial trajectories but which are at the same time never fully independent of more global relations, connections, influences and power relations. As noted earlier, a common denominator in remunicipalisation struggles across different sectors, irrespective of geographical location, is rising costs and prices to consumers alongside poor performance and service delivery, frequently accompanied by the failure of promised modernisation and infrastructure spending. Linked to this, a second common thread, is the failure of the private, the corporate world – the ‘outside’ of the public in this sense – to deliver the external investment that has been promised to revitalise the public realm. This has its own spatial political economy of private ownership with combinations, and as initial privatisations fail often re-combinations, of foreign and domestic capital and increasingly diverse constellations of finance and organisational forms. In North America and Western Europe, it is usually domestic capital that has failed with public service delivery – though often with spectacular success on its own terms of value extraction. But, in the global south, foreign and usually First World multinational capital and financial institutions are heavily implicated, providing another twist to existing forms of colonialism.

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, p. 247). It has certain common features reflecting the political over-reach of commodification processes (associated with the neoliberal political project) and their inherent contradictions, as marketized 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 conjunctural moment in broader processes of neoliberal mutation, it also intersects with ‘actually existing’ forms of politico-economic governance that are at the same time diversely and relationally situated within broader supra-national modes of governance. These diverse trajectories of remunicipalisation, are in a political and conceptual sense open and mutating (at the time of writing), rather than taking a more settled or fixed ‘organic’ form.

To illustrate briefly here, we can consider remunicipalisation from its emergence in two ‘differentially positioned’ (Peck 2017) national settings (see Table 1).

Table 1 here

Argentina and the Peronist pivot

The first case, 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 (Lewkowicz 2015).

In terms of the spatial politics of the conjuncture (Featherstone and Karaliotas 2018), these remunicipalisations have been largely centralized 'top-down' affairs, overseen by national or provisional state authorities with little local political agency or collective mobilization within grassroots civil society (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). In most of these cases there were no explicit local grassroots mobilisations or social movement coalitions, although some neighbourhood assemblies were part of protests against privatization in Buenos Aires. All remunicipalisations were responses to the failings of privatization echoed elsewhere; poor service delivery, increased costs, lack of infrastructure investment and modernization. However, to view them as apolitical exercises in pragmatic state management (Clifton et al 2019) would be to elide over the deeper socio-spatial currents, resistances and mobilizations at play.

Argentina was at the epicentre of Latin American resistance and push back to neoliberal policies, having earlier being a willing pupil of Washington Consensus style economic modernization and opening up the country to foreign capital and multinationals, prior to its economic collapse in 2001. Some of the same social and political forces that supported neoliberal reforms ended up opposing them as grassroots political resistance mobilised against their pernicious effects in the late 1990s. In particular, mass privatisation under the Peronist government of Carlos Menem during the 1990s was reversed by his successors from the same party in the 2000s: Néstor Carlos Kirchner Jr and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

The repositioning of national political elites within broader global economic discourses and relations is notable too. From being the poster child of neoliberal globalisation for other countries in the global south to emulate, under Kirchner and Fernandez de Kirchner from 2002 onwards, the Peronists evoked a much more nationalistic economic posture, including a legal struggle with international regulators, financial institutions and foreign multinationals over the terms of re-nationalisation, amidst demands for the compensation for private operators such as French water utility Suez and the now defunct American corporation, Enron. Although these struggles signalled Kirchner's willingness to be sticking up for Argentine interests and willingness to surf with the Latin American 'pink tide' against a new form of 'western imperialism', the regime was at the same time careful not to ostracise all foreign investment that might detract from macroeconomic stabilisation and the pursuit of an export-driven industrial strategy (Wylde 2011).

The trade unions too were initially incorporated into many privatisations with various financial inducements; in the water sector by the promise of a ten per cent shareholding in privatised companies (Murillo 1998, Loftus and McDonald 2001) which they administered. This turned out to be a somewhat limited exercise in worker participation that served to reinforce clientalism and patronage, rather than enhance economic democracy. The job losses and deteriorating working conditions from privatisation produced a fault line within

the labour movement between union leaders, their employees and those made unemployed, who became part of broader anti-privatisation campaigns and the broader mobilisations against neoliberalism, notably the Piquetero Movement (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 attempt to incorporate these new forces (Dinerstein 2007). With the various de-privatisations, this did lead to the ditching of profit-centred tariffs, greater overall management and regulation of public services but little effective transparency, accountability or participation of citizens (to date) in the newly created public entities (Azpiazu and Castro 2012, Lobina 2017).

In temporal terms, the state-led remunicipalisations can be seen as part of a successful transition politics by the Peronists to the localised conjuncture of neoliberal crisis. 'Kirchnerism' as 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 (Wylde 2011, Grugel and Riggiozzi 2012, Yates and Bakker 2014, Dinerstein 2015). In other words, a political strategy 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.¹²

Germany's restricted neoliberalism and rekommunalisierung wave

Germany,¹³ as we noted earlier, can be seen as the largest global 'cluster' of remunicipalisation, both geographically in the number and extent of cases, and politically in the levels of social movement mobilization and innovative forms of new public enterprise that have emerged. The country has 411 out of the 1,408 remunicipalisations (29.2 %) identified by TNI (Kishimoto et al 2020) with 255 cases identified as de-privatisations alongside the setting up of new local public companies, particularly in rural areas, prevalent in the energy sector. Energy has been the dominant sector (305 cases) but there have also been cases in water, waste services, local government, telecommunications and housing.

German privatization was never quite encased in the full-throttled version of neoliberalism, the abhorrence of state welfarism, individualistic consumerism and marketizing imperatives that developed in Thatcher's Britain or Reagan's US during the 1980s (Hall 2011). While it underwent its own wave of privatisations in telecoms, water, energy and postal services, though notably under its own 'third way' centrist SPD-Green coalitions in the 1990s – rather than the right – the process was altogether more partial and restrained for a number of reasons. In the first place, and using Gramsci's terms, the 'organic' composition of German ordoliberalism (see for example Bonefeld 2012), while having key 'family resemblances' (Peck 2013, p. 143) has always had key differences to its Anglo-American 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 2017, 319).

This context, to some extent, explains the German political elite's willingness to sign up for the European Single Market project, despite its erosion of social democratic post-war gains, particularly around collective bargaining, labour market protections and trade union strength. However, the Anglo-American demonizing of the state, public sector and embrace of the private as the solution to all policy problems never took hold, despite the influence of similar new public management and commercial imperatives across the German state sector (Wissen and Naumann 2006). Similarly, there was not the concerted attack on trade unions. Although organized labour has been weakened through the same kinds of globalization, economic restructuring and job losses found elsewhere in the global north, the model of social partnership and co-determination remains intact in public services and manufacturing sectors, alongside growing precarity in newer services sectors.

Second and relatedly, German political economy, despite neoliberal encroachment, remains at heart a co-ordinated "social" market economy, rather than a liberal market model (Hall and Soskice 2001), with continuing traditions of co-determination and constitutionally underpinned social rights to balance economic freedoms. This means that although it has undergone something of a 'passive revolution' away from a socialized concern with the welfare of the poor towards a more competitive but also nationalist agenda (Belina et al 2012), the acceptance of 'state' co-ordination of the economy at local, national and federal scales remains an important aspect of governance and regulation.

Finally, because of the country's decentralized and federal political system, neoliberal politics actors have not been able to undertake the kind of privatized capture of the country's political economy which occurred in more centralized countries such as Argentina, Chile or most of all, the UK. As Cumbers and Becker note: "Figuratively, neoliberalism in Germany had to engage in 'a march through the institutions' of the complex and multi-layered structures of the Federal state (Gramsci 1971)" (2018: 508). This has meant that the de-centred German state – with its more complicated "nested institutional scaffolding" (ibid) - has been less open to complete capture by the neoliberal project than in more centralized polities. One critical institution, which is typical of Germany's social market ordoliberalism, has been the concept of 'Daseinsvorsorge'; literally translated as provision of a general or common need but effectively means essential public services which the citizen cannot be expected to acquire themselves through the market. Under the German constitution, the state has the statutory right to provide these with the municipal level being the designated layer of government responsible for this. In this respect, privatization could only ever be partial, with private actors being brought in, to governance with a continuing role for the local state in safeguarding this common interest. To this end, local privatisations tended to be on a time-limited basis of concessions or franchises.

Given Stuart Hall's admonition that neoliberalism is not (and never can be) a fully completed hegemonic project (Hall 2011), its complicated and partial German hybrid form has provided particularly fertile terrain for a counter-hegemonic pro-public, remunicipalisation politics to emerge at the local and grassroots level. As private concessions have expired or come up for renewal, many local politicians have taken the opportunity – in the face of the same poor performance experienced elsewhere – of taking assets back into public ownership. As with the Argentinian experience, it is often the same political actors (particular from Christian

Democrat and Social Democratic parties in the German context) that privatized assets in the first place, who now oversee their return to the public sector.

To be clear, in many cases, superficially there seems a simple pragmatism at work with many remunicipalisations happening below the radar as local political actors use the opportunity to quietly, and without any overtly contentious politics, take revenue producing assets back under their own control. But such pragmatism itself is not apolitical, instead being reflective of changing political currents and broader neoliberal mutation. Remunicipalised services such as electricity and water are able to cross-subsidise other elements of the local municipal sector, particularly those that cannot sustain themselves on a commercial basis such as child-care, transport and leisure facilities. An additional qualifying point to make here about the German remunicipalisation experience is that (slightly counterintuitively to an Anglo-American mindset) some local remunicipalisations have been the result of some German states applying EU Single Market regulations to break up the monopoly positions of private utility operators. At the same time, imperatives to privatise have not gone away, as the opening up of the German rail system to private franchises illustrates, but the political balance at the local scale has shifted. Privatisation's failings in Germany have led local political elites across the spectrum to move away from it as a policy option, particularly given the continuing Daseinsvorsorge ethos and the connected responsibilities to provide adequate and affordable essential public services, and in the context of tightening local government finances which neoliberal inspired austerity since 2010 has exacerbated.

This quieter politics of remunicipalisation, however, has run alongside a 'noisier' set of political mobilisations of alternative and grassroots citizens movements – in part supported by Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen and Die Linke political parties – but having their own autonomy and generative elements in developing broader coalitions. The value of a Gramscian conjunctural lens is particularly evident here in recognizing the "confluence of distinct, but intertwined temporalities" (Kipfer 2013, 85); specifically in appreciating how longer established features of German political economy have intersected and been 'recombined' in new mobilizing initiatives. In the first place, a strong legacy of environmental, anti-nuclear and autonomous left social movements since the 1960s, fused with newer generations of anti-capitalist and climate change activists from the late 1990s alter-globalisation movement onwards has produced a continuing tradition of active, dynamic and diverse plurality of social movements and civil society across the country.

Threaded through these developments has been the continuing strength of environmental politics and the Energiewende (Paul 2018), with further momentum provided by the recent Fridays for Future movement mobilisations in 2019 in which 300,000 predominantly young people across 225 cities came out for the first global climate strike (Hunger and Hutter 2020). A degree of developing national consensus, particularly since the mid 2000s on tackling climate change and accelerating an energy transition away from fossil fuels towards renewables, albeit not without its tensions, has enabled local political actors to challenge established private utilities and served to be an important facilitator of remunicipalisation in the energy sector. Given the estimated €25–42 billion needed in infrastructure spending to realise the country's climate change obligations, many local politicians have recognized that massive public action will be required in the face of the large private utilities' foot dragging, because of their entrenched interests in existing fossil fuels capacity and infrastructures. Of

related importance has been the massive accompanying growth in energy cooperatives, often with the encouragement of local state actors, and through two key national legislative supports in 2006, new Feed-in-Tariffs (FITs) for renewable energy and a change in the law to facilitate new cooperatives.¹⁴ Since 2006, 812 energy cooperatives have been established, which, although offering income generating opportunities, research shows have been driven by environmental values of tackling climate change (Klagge and Meister 2018).

The spatial politics of Germany's remunicipalisation conjuncture is itself politically highly variegated. Although the campaigns for remunicipalisation in Berlin and Hamburg have received the most attention, numerous smaller mobilisations have occurred elsewhere and reflect diverse political constellations beyond the kinds of democratic left 'new municipalism' of the big cities. Small towns and rural municipalities, in traditional conservative heartlands and in parts of the former East Germany (where privatization was more widespread than elsewhere following the collapse of communism in the 1990s) have also experienced both remunicipalisations and the setting up of new public utilities. In their analysis of the 72 new public energy companies created since 2005, Wagno and Berlo founded some of the largest clusters in traditionally conservative rural strongholds of southern Germany in Bavaria and Baden Württemberg (Wagner and Berlo 2015). In such areas, environmental politics often fuse with economic development aspirations to generate green jobs locally and add value to the local tax base through preventing 'leakage' beyond the regional economy.

Without overstating the radical politics of Germany's remunicipalisation conjuncture, it does need to be situated within a range of diverse alternative political imaginaries that are contesting existing political and economic elites at the local scale. For example, in the celebrated cases of Berlin and Hamburg energy remunicipalisation campaigns, both the less successful campaign in the former, and the more successful one in the latter were initiated by grassroots coalitions of the left and green 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). In both cases, there was opposition from hegemonic neoliberal forces from Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties, as well as trade union leaderships (which had long-standing collective bargaining agreements with private utilities). Beyond Hamburg and Berlin, opponents of remunicipalisation from the trade unions and local social democratic parties can be found in other municipalities, especially in industrial regions of Nord-Rhein-Westfalen, where many municipal and local governments retain large shareholdings in some private utilities.

Grassroots mobilisations in German cities have also used what, following Gramsci, might be termed 'recombinatory' strategies that exercise collective agency through deploying existing state institutional mechanisms back against local political elites for newly constructed coalitions and initiatives. This is most evident in the use of referendums against privatization (e.g. Leipzig) and for remunicipalisation (e.g. Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen and Stuttgart) which fuses long-established institutions of decentralized governance and direct democracy in the federal republic (some of which go back to the origins of the Federal Republic in the late 1940s) with new initiatives around climate change and anti-neoliberal pro-public discourses. Nor are such mobilisations confined to the cities with some notable challenges to the

corporate landscape of privatization elsewhere. One well-known example is the Hessian 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 with the aim to decarbonize its energy system with its own renewable energy supplies (Cumbers 2016). The resulting new municipal energy company represents an innovative democratic hybrid, part owned by the town's council and part (25%) by a residents' cooperative (Russell 2019).

Overall, German remunicipalisation, while reflecting distinctive national elements of neoliberal mutation, displays considerable internal variegation, which, refracted through a conjunctural lens, allows us to understand how new social and political forces interpolate with ongoing and more deeply rooted processes within a particular spatial trajectory. This complicates our understandings of neoliberalism as a hybrid and mutating phenomenon by drawing attention to the different political constellations that emerge in different places.

Conclusion

The recent global trend towards remunicipalisation has provided a rare glimmer of hope for many on the left faced with the challenged of the continued ascendancy of the right in the first decades of the twenty first century. As neoliberalism falters, mutates but always seems to “fail forward” forward” (Peck et al 2012, 274, also Peck and Theodore 2019), the resurgence of local forms of public ownership in opposition to privatisation is a reminder of the potential for alternative politics and new mobilisations to emerge at the local scale despite continuing neoliberal elite hegemony at national and international levels. While some in the emergent literature on remunicipalisation have rightly cautioned against an over-optimistic prognosis (McDonald and Swyngedouw 2019, Warner and Aldag 2019), we would emphasise here its open-ended and politically generative (Featherstone 2013) character as a phenomenon that does have the potential for mobilisation and coalition-building against neoliberal failings. It is important in this sense not to read off in a deterministic way its implications without more critical interrogation of it as a phenomenon.

Here, we have argued for a more dynamic perspective on remunicipalisation that departs from over-economistic readings one way or the other, to recognise it as a more open-ended and 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. How these new municipalist projects evolve and whether they are sustained at this point in a departure from the status quo is a matter for more detailed ongoing analysis, and is likely to be the outcome of diverse and contested relations in variegated spatial contexts. In this regard, our engagement with Hall and Gramsci here and the deployment of a conjunctural approach, enables a productive enquiry that situates remunicipalisation processes in time and space. Temporally, as part of the mutation of neoliberalism - and underlying organic political and economic forces – the globalisation trend in remunicipalisation represents both a broader global pushback against privatisation towards a return of more public forms of local service provision, 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 conjuncture, we are able to interrogate how remunicipalism in particular places (here the illustrative cases of Argentina

and Germany) works with existing local/national political economic trajectories but also is influenced by broader spatial processes in new combinations of governance and politics.

In terms of left political strategy, Hall's point about 'attending violently to the political moment' is a warning to the left not to fall back into a naïve optimism or a more fatalistic pragmatism about the opportunities arising from remunicipalisation. Political strategy needs to be situated within the recombination of organic and conjunctural social forces and relations. Hall however has less to say about how this insight is operationalised. For us, remunicipalisation in its diverse political composition and combinations is fertile ground for the seeds of a new left mobilising coalition but also offers opportunities for a resurgent far right to seize the mantle of the 'public' in more exclusionary nationalistic and authoritarian directions. To forestall this, the left needs to reappropriate a sense of the 'democratic public' that re-connects with local state spaces in more expansive and inclusive politics. Left projects also need to work 'with the grain' of diverse local municipal experiences and trajectories rather than a more abstract left internationalist municipalism of iconic cases (see Cumbers and Paul 2020). Remunicipalisation campaigns, which emerge out of the everyday but diverse local politics of social reproduction and a faltering neoliberalism, surely have much to offer in this regard?

References

Aldag A Kim Y and Warner M (2019) Austerity urbanism or pragmatic municipalism? Local government responses to fiscal stress in New York State. *EPA: Economy and Space* 51(6): 1287-1305

Azpiazu D and Castro J E (2012) Aguas Públicas: Buenos Aires in Muddled Waters. In: Pigeon M McDonald D A Hoedeman O and Kishimoto S (eds) *Remunicipalisation: Putting Water Back into Public Hands*. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute.

Bayliss K and Hall D (2000) *Independent Power Producers: A Review of the Issues*. A PSIRU Report for PSI. Available at: <<http://www.psiru.org/reports/2000-11-E-IPPs.doc>>

Allen J and Pryke M (2013) Financialising household water: Thames Water, MEIF, and 'ring-fenced' politics. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 6: 419-430.

Angel J (2017) Towards an energy politics in-against-and-beyond the state. Berlin's struggle for energy democracy. *Antipode* 48: 557-576

Becker S Beveridge R and Naumann M (2015) Remunicipalization in German cities: contesting neo-liberalism and reimagining urban governance? *Space and Polity* 19: 76-90.

Belina B Petzold T Schardt J and Schipper S (2012) Neoliberalising the Fordist University: A Tale of Two Campuses in Frankfurt a. M., Germany. *Antipode* 45(3)

Bictin B (2018) How did Grenoble start a French water revolution? It made its water management public. Open Democracy. Available at:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/tc-grenoble-water-municipalisation/> last accessed 4th June 2020.

Bonefeld W (2012) Freedom and the Strong State: On German Ordoliberalism. *New Political Economy* 17(5): 633-656

Brenner N and Theodore N (2002) Cities and the Geographies of “Actually Existing Neoliberalism”. *Antipode* 34(3): 349-379

Brenner N Peck J and Theodore N (2010) Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways. *Global Networks* 10(2): 182-222

Campos-Alba C M Prior D Pérez-López G and Zafra-Gómez J L (2020) Long-term cost efficiency of alternative management forms for urban public transport from the public sector perspective. *Transport Policy* 88(C): 16-23

Carley R J (2016) *Collectivities: Politics at the Intersection of Disciplines*. Lanham, Maryland, Lexington.

Clifton J Warner M Gradus R and Bel G (2019) Remunicipalization of public services: trend or hype? *Journal of Economic Policy Reform*. DOI:10.1080/17487870.2019.1691344.

Colbert M (2017) Why renationalise? Contemporary motivations in Latin America. In Kishimoto S and Petitjean O (Eds) *Reclaiming Public Services: How Cities and Citizens are Turning Back Privatisation*. Amsterdam, Transnational Institute,

Cooper D (2017) Prefiguring the state. *Antipode* 49 (2): 335-356.

Cumbers A (2012) *Reclaiming Public Ownership: Making Space for Economic Democracy*. London: Zed.

Cumbers A (2016) Remunicipalization, the low carbon transition, and energy democracy. In Worldwatch Institute (ed.) *State of the World Report 2016*. Washington, DC: Worldwatch.

Cumbers A and Becker S (2018) Making sense of remunicipalisation: theoretical reflections on and political possibilities from Germany’s Rekommunalisierung process. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 11: 503-517.

Cumbers A and Paul F (2020) Adapting to the political moment and diverse terrain of ‘Actually Existing Municipalisms’. *Soundings* 74: 40-53.

Davidson A (2008) The Uses and Abuses of Gramsci. *Thesis Eleven* 95 (1): 68-94.

Davidson R (2018) Stuart Hall: Problems of the Conjuncture. *Thesis Eleven* 148 (1): 93-97.

Dinerstein A C (2007) Workers' Factory Takeovers and New State Policies in Argentina: Towards and 'Institutionalisation' of Non-Governmental Public Action? *Policy & Politics* 35(5): 529-550

Dinerstein A C (2015) *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: the Art of Organising Hope*. London, Palgrave Macmillan.

Featherstone D J (2008) *Resistance, Space and Political Identities: the Making of Counter-Global Networks*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Featherstone D J (2013) The contested politics of climate change and the crisis of neo-liberalism. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 12 (1): 44-64.

Featherstone D J and Karaliotas L (2018) Challenging the spatial politics of the European crisis: nationed narratives and trans-local solidarities in the post-crisis conjuncture. *Cultural Studies* 32(2): 286-307

Gradus R and Budding T (2018) Political and institutional explanations for increasing remunicipalization." *Urban Affairs Review*, Published Early View. doi:10.1177/1078087418787907.

Gramsci A (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International Publishers.

Grant M (2015) Water in public hands: remunicipalisation in the United States. In S Kishimoto E Lobina and O Petitjean (eds) *Our Public Water Future: the Global Experience with Remunicipalisation*. Amsterdam, TNI.

Grossman L (2006) Does cultural studies have futures? Should it? (or what's the matter with New York?), *Cultural Studies*, 20:1, 1-32

Grugl J and Riggiozzi P (2012) Post-neoliberalism in Latin America: Rebuilding and Reclaiming the State after Crisis. *Development and Change* 43(1): 1-21

Hachfeld D (2009) Rekommunalisierung – Lehren aus Potsdam und Grenoble. In: Candeias M Rilling R and Weise K (eds): *Krise der Privatisierung. Rückkehr des Öffentlichen*. Berlin.

Hall D (2012) *Re-municipalising municipal services in Europe*. Report commissioned by EPSU. London: PSIRU.

Hall D and Lobina E (2001) Private to Public: International lessons of water re-municipalisation in Grenoble, France. Greenwich, Public Services International Research Unit. Available at: <https://www.psiru.org/reports/private-public-international-lessons-water-re-municipalisation-grenoble-france.html>.

Hall D and Lobina E (2007) Profitability and the poor: Corporate strategies, innovation and sustainability. *Geoforum* 38(5): 772-785

Hall D Lobina E and de la Motte R (2005) Public resistance to privatisation in water and energy. *Development in Practice* 15(3-4): 286-301.

Hall D Lobina E and Terhorst P (2013) Re-municipalisation in the early twenty-first century: Water in France and energy in Germany. *International Review of Applied Economics* 27(2)

Hall S (1979) The great moving right show. *Marxism Today* January: 14-20.

Hall S (1985) Authoritarian Populism. *New Left Review* 151

Hall S (1988) *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. London, Verso.

Hall S (2011) The neoliberal revolution. *Cultural Studies* 25 (6): 705-728.

Hall S (and Schwarz B) (2017) *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*. Duke University Press.

Hall S and Massey D (2010) Interpreting the Crisis. *Soundings* 44: 57-71

Hall P and Soskice D (2001) *Varieties of Capitalism*. Oxford: University Press.

Halmer S and Hauenschild B (2014) *Remunicipalisation of Public Services in the EU*. Vienna: OGPP.

Hanna T (2018) *Our Common Wealth – the Return of Public Ownership in the United States*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Hancox D (2020) The case for truly taking back control – by reversing the privatisation of our cities. The Guardian, 16th January: available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2020/jan/16/the-case-for-truly-taking-back-control-by-reversing-the-privatisation-of-our-cities>. Last accessed January 17th 2020.

Höffler F Schaefer C Papenfuß U Rosenfeld M T W Landsberg G (2013) Rekommunalisierung: Renaissance öffentlicher Unternehmen?, *Wirtschaftsdienst*, 93, (2): 71-86.

Hunger S and Hutter S (2020) Online strikes with the usual suspects: How Fridays for Future has coped with the Covid-19 pandemic. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/06/29/online-strikes-with-the-usual-suspects-how-fridays-for-future-has-coped-with-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Jessop B (2016) *The State: Past, Present, Future*. Polity Press.

Jessop B (2017) The Organic Crisis of the British State: Putting Brexit in its Place. *Globalizations* 14(1): 133-141

Jessop B (2018) On academic capitalism. *Critical Policy Studies* 12(1): 104-109

Jessop B Bonnett K Bromley S and Ling T (1988) *Thatcherism: A Tale of Two Nations* London: Polity Press.

Johnson M Rubery J and Grimshaw D (2019) Public sector employment relations after the crisis: A comparative case study analysis of UK local authorities. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, early online access, DOI: 10.1177/0143831X18823699

Kipfer S (2013) City, country, hegemony: Antonio Gramsci' spatial historicism. In Ekers M Hart G Kipfer S and Loftus A (eds) *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*. Chichester, Wiley, pp. 83-103.

Kishimoto S Lobina E Petitjean O (2015) *Here to stay: Water remunicipalisation as a global trend*. Amsterdam, TNI, Multinational Observatory and PSIRU.

Kishimoto S and Petitjean O (2017) *Reclaiming Public Services: How Cities and Citizens are Turning Back Privatisation*. Paris and Amsterdam: Transnational Institute.

Kishimoto S Steinfort L and Petitjean O (2020) *The Future is Public: Towards the Democratic Ownership of Public Services*. Amsterdam, Transnational Institute.

Klagge B and Meister T (2018) Energy cooperatives in Germany – an example of successful alternative economies?, *Local Environment*, 23:7, 697-716

Kozarzewski P Bałtowski M and Mickiewicz T (2020) State capitalism in Poland and Hungary. In Wright M Wood G Cuervo-Cazurra A Sun P Okhmatovskiy I and Grosman A (eds) *Oxford Handbook on State Capitalism and the Firm*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewkowicz J (2015) Renationalisation: the Argentine case shows it can be done. Open Democracy March 20th. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/renationalisation-argentine-case-shows-it-can-be-done/>. Last accessed 2nd July 2020.

Libbe J (2013): Rekommunalisierung in Deutschland – eine empirische Bestandsaufnahme, in: Matecki C and Schulten T (eds): *Zurück zur öffentlichen Hand? Chancen und Erfahrungen der Rekommunalisierung*. Hamburg

Lobina E (2015) Introduction: Calling for progressive water policies. In: Kishimoto S, Lobina E, Petitjean O (eds) *Our public water future: The global experience with remunicipalisation*. Transnational Institute, Public Services International Research Unit, Multinationals Observatory, Municipal Services Project, European Federation of Public Service Unions, Amsterdam, London, Paris, Cape Town and Brussels (<http://www.psir.org/reports/our-public-water-future-global-experience-remunicipalisation>)

Lobina E (2017) Water Remunicipalisation: Between Pendulum Swings and Paradigm Advocacy. In: Bell S Allen A Hofmann P and Teh T (eds) *Urban Water Trajectories*. Springer. 149-161

Lobina E and Hall D (2001) *Private to Public: International Lessons of Water Remunicipalisation in Grenoble, France*. London: PSIRU.

Lobina E and Hall D (2007) Experience with private sector participation in Grenoble, France and lessons on strengthening public water operations. *Utilities Policy* 15: 93-109

Loftus A J and McDonald D A (2001) Of liquid dreams: a political ecology of water privatization in Buenos Aires. *Environment and Urbanization* 13(2)

Massey D (1984) *The Spatial Division of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production*. Oxford: Macmillan.

Massey D (2005) *For Space*. London: Sage.

McDonald D A (2018) Remunicipalisation: The future of water services? *Geoforum* 91: 47-56.

McDonald D A (2019) Will the Empire strike back? Powerbrokers and remunicipalisation in the water sector. *Water Alternatives* 12 (2): 348-359.

McDonald D A and Swyngedouw E (2019) The new water wars: struggles for remunicipalisation. *Water Alternatives* 12(2): 322-333

Mirowski P (2013) *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. London: Verso.

Murillo M V (1997) *From Populism to Neoliberalism: Labor Unions and Market-Oriented Reforms in Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela*. PhD thesis, Harvard University.

Ong A (2007) Neoliberalism as a mobile technology. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32(1): 3-8

Paul F (2018) Deep Entanglements: History, space and (energy) struggle in the German Energiewende. *Geoforum*, 91: 1-9

Peck J (2010) Zombie neoliberalism and the ambidextrous state. *Theoretical Criminology* 14(1)

Peck J (2013a) Explaining (with) neoliberalism. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 1:2, 132-157.

Peck J (2013b) Pushing austerity: state failure, municipal bankruptcy and the crises of fiscal federalism in the USA. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 7, 17-44.

Peck J (2017) Transatlantic City. Part 1: Conjunctural Urbanism. *Urban Studies* 54:1, 1-30.

Peck J (2019) Combination. In: Antipode Editorial Collective (ed.) *Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 50-55.

- Peck J and Tickell A (2002) Neoliberalizing Space. *Antipode* 34(3): 380-404
- Peck J and Theodore N (2019) Still Neoliberalism? *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118:2, 245-265.
- Peck J Theodore N and Brenner N (2019) Neoliberalism Resurgent? Market Rule after the Great Recession. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111: 265-288.
- Petitjean O (2017) Remunicipalisation in France: From addressing corporate abuse to reinventing democratic, sustainable local public services. In Kishimoto S and Petitjean O (Eds) *Reclaiming Public Services: How Cities and Citizens are Turning Back Privatisation*. Amsterdam, Transnational Institute, pp. 24-33.
- Pigeon M McDonald D A Hoedeman O and Kishimoto S (2012) *Remunicipalisation: Putting Water Back into Public Hands*. Amsterdam: Corporate Europe Observatory and Transnational Institute.
- Polanyi K (2001) [1944] *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Popartan L A Ungureanu C Velicu I Amores M J (2020) Splitting Urban Waters: The Politicisation of Water in Barcelona between Populism and Anti-Populism. *Antipode* early online version, doi: 10.1111/anti.12630.
- Röber M (2009) Privatisierung adé? Rekommunalisierung öffentlicher Dienstleistungen im Lichte des Public Managements. *Verwaltung und Management* 5/2009: 225-280.
- Roth L (2019) Which municipalism? Let's be choosy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/which-municipalism-lets-be-choosy/> last accessed 15th June 2020.
- Russell B (2019) This small German town took back the power – and went fully renewable. The Conversation 6th December. <https://theconversation.com/this-small-german-town-took-back-the-power-and-went-fully-renewable-126294>. Last accessed 21 July 2020.
- Transnational Institute (2020). Public Futures. Global database of de-privatised public services. Retrieved from: publicfutures.org, last accessed 2nd July 2020.
- Wagner O and Berlo K (2015) The wave of remunicipalisation of energy networks and supply in Germany – the establishment of 72 new municipal power utilities. *ECEEE SUMMER STUDY PROCEEDINGS* 191(3): 559-569
- Wagner O and Berlo K (2017) Remunicipalisation and foundation of municipal utilities in the German energy sector: details about newly established enterprises, *Journal of Sustainable Development of Energy, Water and Environment Systems* 5: 396–407.
- Warner M E and Aldag A M (2019) Re-municipalization in the US: a pragmatic response to contracting. *Journal of Economic Policy Reforms* DOI: 10.1080/17487870.2019.1646133

Warner M E and Clifton J (2014) Marketisation, public services and the city: the potential for Polanyian counter movements. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 7: 45–61.

Wissen M and Naumann M (2006) A New Logic of Infrastructure Supply: The Commercialization and the Transformation of Urban Governance in Germany. *Social Justice Journal* 33(3): 20-37

Wylde C (2011) State, Society and Markets in Argentina: The Political Economy of Neodesarrollismo under Néstor Kirchner, 2003–2007. *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 30 (4): 436-452.

Yates J S and Bakker K (2014) Debating the ‘post-neoliberal turn’ in Latin America. *Progress in Human Geography* 38(1)

¹ To our knowledge, the term was first used by researchers at the University of Greenwich’s Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU) in relation to the return of privatised water to public ownership in the French city of Grenoble (Hall and Lobina 2001).

² An NGO and think tank committed to “building a just, democratic and sustainable planet” (from TNI’s website at: <https://www.tni.org/en>)

³ Under the German federal constitution, municipalities also have a responsibility to look after the wellbeing of citizens in basic service provision; known as “Daseinsvorsorge” (see Cumbers and Paul 2020).

⁴ See also Wagner and Berlo (2017).

⁵ See the CEO/TNI’s highly informative water remunicipalisation tracker website: <http://www.remunicipalisation.org/>.

⁶ See the recent (December 2019) global public ownership hosted by TNI in Amsterdam (see: <https://futureispublic.org/>, last accessed 5th June 2020). The work of the UK advocacy group WeOwnIt should also be acknowledged here in the battle against privatisation and for public ownership: <https://weownit.org.uk/>, last accessed June 5th 2020.

⁷ Writing from the same ‘pragmatist’ stable of management and organisational studies, one set of authors even go as far as to claim – somewhat erroneously – that more critical left accounts of remunicipalisation are ‘inaccurate’ in reading it off as “a step towards the rejection of business-like local public service delivery” (Voorn et al 2020: 1), though it is not clear what political or social actors are being referred to here.

⁸ See Fearless Cities website: <http://fearlesscities.com/en/about-fearless-cities>, last accessed 15th June 2020.

⁹ One example from the UK is the pressure group We Own It, established in 2013 to lobby for public ownership and against profit driven privatisation, see: <https://weownit.org.uk/about-us>, last accessed 10th June 2020..

¹⁰ 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 stabilised 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.

¹¹ As evidenced by the case of Thames Water, London’s private operator, which under its Australian owner, MacQuarrie Bank, increased the debt level to pay shareholder dividends, to such an extent

that it had no capital left to modernise the nineteenth century sewerage system (Allen and Pryke 2013).

¹² Although the neoliberal government of Mauricio Macri was in turn voted out of office in favour of a Peronist in 2019.

¹³ A longer and more developed discussion of the theoretical and political implications of German Rekommunalisierung is available in Cumbers and Becker (2018).

¹⁴ The continuing influence of neoliberal thinking in Germany remains however, most evident in recent legislation (2014, 2017) to abolish FITs for more market competitive forms of subsidy.

Figure 1: The Global Remunicipalisation Trend (source: Kishimoto *et al* 2020)



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 epicenter 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 (i.e. 'organic' forces) | 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, return of statist Peronism including significant renationalisations | Partial neoliberal reforms including privatisations in 1990s but uneven across decentred polity. 'Energiewende' involving new political mobilisations at local and national scales. |
| Social and spatial politics of remunicipal conjuncture | Heavily centralised state, some provincial autonomy. Clientalist (Peronist) relations in municipal governance. Strong trade unions but often conservative and co-opted by state. | 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) |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Extent of democratic engagement and participation</p> | <p>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)</p> | <p>New community led forms of ownership and hybrid cooperative models especially in rural areas; radical democratic and egalitarian models proposed (e.g. Berlin, Hamburg),</p> |
|--|--|---|