

Electoral success and beyond: When Copenhagen shows us the way

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Sean Da Ros, Wikimedia Commons

The courage to leave, the fear of arriving

It rains in the canal

The current shows the way to the sea

Copenhagen, Vetusta Morla

2015, which began with the historic victory of Syriza in Greece, seemed to herald winds of change in Europe from the south. A new radical left was flourishing on the ruins of austerity, swallowing up much of the social and electoral space of a waning social democracy, which had long since mutated into social-liberalism. The candidates for change won the main capitals in Spain, including Madrid and Barcelona, and in Portugal the left obtained a magnificent result, forcing the socialist party into a government agreement unheard of since the Carnation Revolution.

The defeat of Syriza's experience of government, with the troika's imposition of the third memorandum, not only cut short the Greek spring, but also struck a blow to the aspirations of the continent's left as a whole, which has not been able to overcome it since then. In Portugal, we are currently seeing how the experience of the "geringonça" government has failed, and is on the way to re-establishing the first absolute socialist majority in the early elections next January. Meanwhile, in Spain, United Podemos has gone from storming the skies, disputing the sorpasso, to participating as a minority partner in a social-liberal government alongside the PSOE.

With the exception of the French presidential elections of 2017, where the candidacy of France Insoumise achieved a good result despite failing to enter the second round, the rest of the forces have obtained poor or bad results. In the European elections, the left-wing forces were relegated to being the last group in the European Parliament. All this against the backdrop of the electoral rise of green liberalism, which achieved its best result in the aforementioned European elections and has managed to enter the German and Austrian governments.

Daniel Bensaid used to say that revolutions come when no one expects them or when no one is expecting them. In this untimely manner we have seen how, in this pandemic 2021, a series of municipal victories have emerged that have as a common denominator a strong grassroots movement for access to housing and for an alternative city model to the one dominated by the market.

Last September, the Communist Party (KPÖ), which had not been represented in the Austrian parliament for decades, won the elections in Graz, the country's second largest city, with 28.8 per cent of the vote. It thus overtook the conservatives (ÖVP), who had held on to the mayor's office for 18 years. The communist victory in Graz is based on a strong grassroots base linked to anti-eviction activism, based on several elements. The KPÖ has promoted a tenants' hotline as a first point of contact for people in trouble with their landlords; a legal advice service for 'victims of speculators'; communist councillors have salary limits, and donate two thirds of their salaries to a party fund, with which they help unemployed and evicted people; and they have run successful signature campaigns, such as the one to call a referendum against the attempted privatisation of the public housing stock, which they won with 97 per cent. A mixture of long-term activism, political and personal coherence of their representatives and partial gains through popular mobilisation have been the ingredients of the KPÖ's success in Graz. A counter-current model that debunks the myth that everything is a story and a speech and that you cannot win elections with certain symbols and names.

In the same month of September in which the victory in Graz was celebrated, a triple vote took place in Berlin for the general and municipal elections and for a referendum, forced by the popular movement for decent housing. On the one hand, the general elections were a disaster for the left, and Die Linke was on the verge of being left out of the Bundestag for the first time, after focusing its campaign on subordinating itself to a government with the SPD. In the municipal elections, the red (Socialists 21.4%), green (Greens 18.9%) and red (Die Linke 14%) municipal governments were confirmed. Meanwhile, the Berlin referendum was a real success and a true demonstration of the strength of the housing movement. In order to hold the vote alone, the organisers had to collect 175,000 valid, handwritten and fully verified signatures, demonstrating that it was an unprecedented mobilisation and social self-organisation in Germany compared to recent years.

More than a quarter of the electorate took part in the consultation, the minimum required for the measure to pass the German Senate, with the Yes vote winning with 56.4% of the votes, compared to the No vote, with 39%. A victory that formally only had the support of Die Linke, while the rest of the municipal government coalition either called for a no vote, like the Social Democrats, or maintained an ambiguous position, like the Greens. This situation gives even more value to this victory, which proposes to confiscate no less than 200,000 homes from large landlords and bring them into public ownership.

The success of the Berlin referendum, like the success of Graz, highlights the importance of organisation, establishment and social fabric, while at the same time contradicting the mantra of governmentism, which entrusts social conquests solely to institutional activity, reinforcing the logic of delegation to the detriment of social organisation. Indeed, the Berlin referendum, despite being non-binding, generates a conflict between the institution and popular demands that widens the space of the possible.

The last of the municipalist victories in 2021 was that of the Red-Green Alliance in Copenhagen, which won 24.6% of the vote, with a campaign centred on access to decent housing as a right and the protection of the city's natural spaces such as Amager Faelled. In this way, the Social Democratic Party, although it will maintain the mayoralty in the Danish capital through the alliance with the Greens and Liberals, is no longer the party with the most votes after a hundred years of hegemony. The Red-Green Alliance was founded in 1989 from the confluence of different currents of the radical left, and has maintained a constant representation in the Danish parliament since 1994. But it was not until 2011 that it consolidated its 6-7 % share at the national level.

In addition to the victory in Copenhagen, the Red-Green Alliance has managed to become the leading force on the island of Bornholm and second in Frederiksberg (a city in the Copenhagen metropolitan area). Although they achieved 7.3% in the country as a whole, these municipal

elections have been a victory as a whole, as beyond the capital, they have enabled them to gain representation in dozens of municipalities where they had never been represented before. It is important to note that these results came after the Red-Green Alliance facilitated a minority government of the Social Democrats to oust the right, but also refused to enter the executive, remaining the left-wing opposition both on the streets and in parliament.

The result in Copenhagen, added to the referendum in Berlin and the winning of the mayoralty of Graz in Austria, timidly gives the alternative left, outside of the subalternisation to social liberalism, the prospect of victory. An alternative in which social and territorial implantation, the problematisation of access to housing and the questioning of the mercantilised model of the city appear to be key elements in understanding these electoral successes.

It is surprising how we on the left spend so much energy on names or looking upwards, when the problem and the solutions lie below us. Of course, it is easier to look for shortcuts of electoral pyrotechnics than to dedicate ourselves to the slow and impatient reconstruction of the social fabric from concrete conflicts. Now that there is so much talk of names for a *Frente Amplio*, perhaps our concern should be more about building broad movements anchored in the territory, that respond to the predatory logic of capital and that propose an ecosocialist and feminist alternative that puts housing or energy, to give key examples, under social control.

In other words, our concern must be to rebuild the social fabric and social mobilisation, to value organisation and organisations, not as ends in themselves but as instruments of transformation and mutual support. I remember how Miguel Romero always said that social victories came first, then political victories, and sometimes these became electoral victories. We have gone too long without social victories. The metal strike in the Bay of Cadiz could be a good start. Perhaps next year we will have to look more closely in the mirror of popular mobilisation processes such as those in Berlin, or in victories such as those in Copenhagen, which show that it is possible to overcome social liberalism by pushing the limits of what is possible.

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P.S.

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