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## Smart Feminist Cities: The Case of Barcelona en Comú

**Abstract:** Barcelona en Comú, the feminist political platform currently running the city of Barcelona, is cultivating a Smart Feminist City aiming to put technology at the service of the people rather than, for example, selling citizen data to corporations. This paper extends Elizabeth Grosz's theorisation of the Bodies-Cities interface to a Bodies-Cities-Technologies interface to think through the implications of the ways in which a feminist city such as Barcelona is reversing the neoliberal Smart City paradigm through its harnessing of technology to use for the common good and to challenge social discrimination. In doing so, this paper prompts us to think through the implications of these changes on the production of subjectivities through the Bodies-Cities-Technologies interface.

Using a feminist philosophical framework this paper considers the case of Barcelona en Comú, the explicitly feminist political platform currently running Barcelona, to illustrate how thinking through the lens of feminist philosophy enables us to appreciate how Barcelona en Comú is reimagining *Smart Cities* as ethical, feminist and anti-racist cities that harness and develop technology for the common good of all citizens rather than for profit of private capital and the elites. This work takes seriously our relations with technology and in framing these using feminist philosophy and political activism, imagines these as a force for social change. In doing so, I hope to gesture toward a feminist philosophy of technology that theorizes the ways in which particular practices of feminist cities like Barcelona open spaces for the figuration of explicitly feminist political subjectivities. Engaging with these ideas, using a feminist philosophical framework helps us to think deeper about the types of subjectivities cities are nurturing, urging us to consider the ethical and political projects relating to the entanglements of human being and technology without erasing our lived differences of gender. Ultimately, this paper hopes to contribute to emerging conversations offering critical feminist and anti-capitalist perspectives on technology, with a focus on feminist cities, in order to articulate and imagine new ways of being in the world that recognize the entanglement of human and non-human, as well as the algorithms of oppression (Noble 2018) in which we are all now embedded.

## Bodies-Cities and Feminist Philosophy

In “Bodies-Cities”, a chapter from *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (1995), Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz is interested in how to think the relations between bodies and cities. Grosz argues that “the city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality” noting that “the built environment provides the context and coordinates for contemporary forms of body” (Grosz 1995, 104). Grosz’s work points out that it is the city which organizes and “automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies: it is the condition and milieu in which corporeality is socially, sexually, and discursively produced” (Grosz 1995, 104). Given this notion that the city is the frame and context in which bodies are sexually produced and gendered I agree with Grosz when she suggests that “the relations between bodies and cities are more complex than may have been realized” (Grosz 1995, 104). And, when thinking through the idea of a feminist city as we will in this paper, these relations become even more interesting.

Grosz ultimately argues that we can understand the relations between bodies and cities as constitutive and mutually defining but she first takes us through two traditional models that articulate the interrelation of bodies and cities (Grosz 1995, 104). First, there is a view undergirded by Western traditions of humanism, that “the city is a reflection, projection, or product of bodies” (Grosz 1995, 105). The second model, elaborated by liberal political philosophers like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, “suggests a parallelism or isomorphism between the body and the city, or the body and the state” (Grosz 1995, 105). Grosz points out that while the body is seen as parallel, the body is “rarely attributed a sex” (Grosz 1995, 106). Critically assessing these two models which, it is important to stress, still underlie conceptions of civic and public architecture as well as town planning Grosz notes that there is a slippage from conceptions of the state to city (Grosz 1995, 106–107).<sup>1</sup> And, as the work of Barcelona en Comú demonstrates, sometimes the interests of states and cities are in conflict and what is “good for the nation or state is not necessarily good for the city” (Grosz 1995, 107). Grosz thus offers a third model of how to think the relations between bodies and cities that combines elements of each of these models (Grosz 1995, 108). On her model Grosz suggests that the lived (and thus sexed and gendered and raced) body is active in production of the city, however the two are not causally linked rather they are “mutually defining” (Grosz 1995, 108). Grosz ultimately argues that while “there may be an isomorphism between

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<sup>1</sup> She writes that “there is a slippage from conceptions of the state, which as a legal entity, raises political questions of sovereignty, to conceptions of the city, a cultural entity whose crucial political questions revolve around commerce” (Grosz 1995, 106–107).

the body and the city” it is not a mirror and rather “there is a two-way linkage that could be defined as an interface” (Grosz 1995, 108). Ultimately Grosz argues that cities and bodies define and establish each other through this model of an interface (Grosz 1995, 108). The implication of this model means that cities, like bodies, can be conceived of as gendered and raced and classed. And, consequently, we can begin to understand how cities can privilege certain genders, races, classes, and able-bodied citizens.

Importantly, for Grosz, while the city is not the most significant ingredient in the social construction of bodies it is nevertheless an important element because “the form, structure, and norms of the city seep into and affect all the other elements that go into the constitution of corporeality” (Grosz 1995, 108). Grosz’s articulation of the Bodies-Cities interface thus offers a framework from which to think through the effects of the often patriarchal and racist social norms underlying contemporary neoliberal *Smart Cities*. It also offers, however, the possibilities of challenging these norms. Thinking through the interface, Grosz notes, “in turn, the body (as cultural product) transforms, reinscribes the urban landscape according to its changing (demographic) needs” (Grosz 1995, 109). The city, then, can be imagined as a “hinge between the population and the individual, the body, its distribution, habits, alignments, pleasures, norms, and ideals are the ostensive object of governmental regulation” (Grosz 1995, 109). The city, for Grosz, can be understood as “both a mode for the regulation and administration of subjects but also an urban space in turn reinscribed by the particularities of its occupation and use” (Grosz 1995, 109).

Grosz works through a number of implications from this schematic survey but the one I am interested in here is the point she makes about social rules and the production and circulation of power. Grosz writes:

The city’s form and structure provides the context in which social rules and expectations are internalized or habituated in order to ensure social conformity or, failing this, position social marginality at a safe distance (ghettoization). This means that the city must be seen as the most immediate locus for the production and circulation of power. (Grosz 1995, 109)

Grosz’s point is clear: we must understand the interface of the city as locus “for the production and circulation of power” (Grosz 1995, 109). This interface of Bodies-Cities becomes a particularly interesting model to think through the ways in which a feminist city has strategic opportunities to challenge the power of patriarchal elites and ultimately channel and circulate the power back to and through the diverse citizens of the city. Grosz concludes this short chapter with a particularly prescient remark noting (remembering this paper was published in 1995) that if indeed the city is “an active force in constituting bodies, and always leaves its traces on the

subject's corporeality" the dramatic "transformation of the city as a result of the information revolution" will have direct "effects on the inscription of bodies" (Grosz 1995, 110). But she writes, "only time will tell" (Grosz 1995, 110). In the 25 years since this chapter has been published the information and technological revolution has truly taken hold and it seems crucial, perhaps even more urgent than ever, to critically think through the ways in which multiple technologies we engage with daily mediate our lives, are entangled in the production of our subjectivities, our politics, and, of course, our experiences of so-called *Smart Cities*.

Thinking more recently about technology and cities, architect Alejandro Zaero-Polo raises similar concerns as those that Grosz gestured toward in 1995 in his article "The Posthuman City: Imminent Urban Commons" (Zaero-Polo 2017) in *Architectural Design*. He is critical of urban planning which remains within the humanist framework and argues this is no longer effective at addressing "the urgent questions cities are facing today" (Zaero-Polo 2017). He argues that cities have become "a crucial intersection between technology and politics where the equations between wealth, labour, resources and energy have to be reset to address the current shortcomings of neo-liberal economies" (Zaero-Polo 2017, 29). He further argues that cities must become "devices for the common good" and that "imminent urban technologies need to locate resources and technologies at their core" (Zaero-Polo 2017, 29). He refers to these as "imminent urban commons" and argues that these commons "need to become instructions of devolution and ecological awareness, constructed transversally across technologies and resources" (Zaero-Polo 2017, 29).

Bringing a feminist lens to Zaero-Polo's thinking on cities and technology it is important to recognize that many contemporary feminist and anti-racist scholars point out that technology is not neutral, and that it is, as Safiya Noble argues in her work in *Algorithms of Oppression*, socially constructed (Noble 2018; Bishop et al. 2020). Contemporary conversations in feminist technoscience, feminist media studies and critical algorithmic studies point out that the technology we engage with daily is undergirded by sexist and racist epistemologies and ontologies. Indeed, there is still much work to be done that brings together feminist and anti-racist critiques of technology with critiques of *Smart Cities*. Using a philosophical lens enables this exploration to go deeper and offers the opportunity to think critically about the interface of Bodies-Cities and technologies that Grosz articulates. This paper thus asks the reader to consider how bodies (in all their lived differences), cities and technologies are constitutive and mutually defining (Grosz 1995, 104). Ultimately, we will build on Grosz's ideas here to think through the interface of bodies-cities-technologies in feminist *Smart Cities*.

This paper thus poses the following questions: If the *Smart City* along with its increased technological surveillance and harvesting of data for profit is the most

immediate locus for the production and circulation of power, how does a feminist city challenge this model? What can we learn from a city that is challenging the norms and forms of the status quo (the neoliberal patriarchal elites)? Do feminist cities produce feminist subjectivities? How is the feminist city contributing to/producing social imaginaries in which our subjectivities are made and remade?

## Barcelona: A Smart Feminist City

While I cannot answer all these questions here this paper hopes to open space for these future conversations to take place. But first, what is a feminist city? The website for the Barcelona city council explains:

We're a feminist city, applying the gender perspective in all municipal policies and taking a collective stand against gender violence. We're a city which takes into account and combats the everyday difficulties faced by women in terms of care, job insecurity and labour discrimination, safety at home and in the streets. We're a feminist city, which protects and stands up for sexual and gender diversity, which has created a pioneering LGBTI centre and which fights LGBTI-phobia. We're a city based on feminism, reinventing ourselves every day to achieve a space which is free and safe for everybody. (Info Barcelona n. d.)

Barcelona en Comú is the political platform currently running the city of Barcelona and this platform is part of what has become known as the International New Municipalist movement. International New Municipalism emerged out of the wake of the global uprisings of 2010–11 concerned with creating “new ways of doing electoral politics” and challenging the current capitalist political and economic models (Shea Baird 2016). In 2015 many of these citizen platforms across Spain “swept to victory ... on a wave of public indignation at cuts and corruption” (Shea Baird and Miralles 2021). These citizen platforms, often made up of activists, were intent on occupying the corrupt political institutions in order to create change.

Most basically in International New Municipalism there is a practical and pragmatic commitment to grassroots radical democracy and the needs of the local communities and neighborhoods. Common life and community are refigured in International New Municipalism. As it is international, it is also about connecting local communities and activists on a global scale. Kate Shea Baird writes:

... municipalism constructs alternative forms of collective identity and citizenship based on residence and participation. Municipalism is pragmatic and goal-based: in a neoliberal system that tells us ‘there is no alternative’, municipalism proves that things can be done differently through small, but concrete, victories, like remunicipalizing basic services or providing local ID schemes for undocumented immigrants. Municipalism allows us to reclaim individual

and collective autonomy; in response to citizen demands for real democracy, municipalism opens up forms of participation that go beyond voting once every few years. (Shea Baird 2017)

Along with these demands for real democracy and the multi-pronged challenges the platforms throw at neoliberal political institutions and systems, the International New Municipalist movement views feminism as key. Barcelona en Comú are committed to what they refer to as the feminization of politics. Kate Shea Baird and Laura Roth explain:

... the feminisation of politics, beyond its concern for increasing the presence of women in decision-making spaces and implementing public policies to promote gender equality, is about changing the way politics is done [...] It aims to shatter masculine patterns that reward behaviours such as competition, urgency, hierarchy and homogeneity, which are less common in – or appealing to – women. Instead, a feminized politics seeks to emphasize the importance of the small, the relational, the everyday, challenging the artificial division between the personal and political. This is how we change the underlying dynamics of the system and construct emancipatory alternatives. (Shea Baird and Roth 2017)

This changing of the way politics is done, from a feminist perspective, plays a central role in Barcelona becoming a feminist city. This feminizing of politics also plays out in concrete ways in the landscape of the city. In 2015, after the election of Mayor Ada Colau and Barcelona en Comú to government, the city council began implementing strategic feminist initiatives, policies and protocols in the governing of the city. Barcelona en Comú have a city councilor dedicated to feminist and LGBTI issues. They have a Strategic Plan for Gender Justice and a Strategic Plan Against Sexism in the City (2017–2021). There are many initiatives and campaigns including the protocol against sexual assault and harassment in night clubs, improved public lighting in most neighborhoods, free municipal childcare and all urban planning takes a gender perspective. The new Gender Justice Plan (2021–2025) aims to consolidate municipal policies of recent years and eradicate inequalities between men and women “promoting a fairer and more equal city for all inhabitants” (BEC Gender Justice Plan 2021–2025). The new plan takes into account the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on equality between men and women and is based around four areas: 1) Institutional change; 2) Economy for life and organization of time: “to achieve a fairer and more sustainable economy which guarantees equality in life conditions between men and women, we must recognize the fundamental role of all work necessary for subsistence, reproduction and people’s well-being, as well as joint responsibility in assuming care work”. This point includes the fight against the digital gender divide and women’s access to ICT industries; 3) City of rights; 4) Close and sustainable neighborhoods (BEC Gender Justice Plan 2021–2025).

What I am particularly interested in here is the critical and feminist view Barcelona en Comú has on so-called *Smart Cities*. Barcelona offers an excellent example of how a feminist city can challenge the neoliberal *Smart City* narrative through its attention to the ways in which technology can be used for the common good and how it may help to challenge many forms of social discrimination. Barcelona en Comú proposes ethical and innovative uses of technology to recognize the inequalities in lived differences between men and women and illustrates how technology can be put to use in creating a city which eradicates these inequalities in various ways. Understanding the relations between Bodies-Cities-Technologies as an interface we can now appreciate how gendered, raced, classed and differently abled bodies in this feminist city are producing and being produced by the city in new ways. Critiquing the neoliberal *Smart City* from this philosophical perspective and thinking about the ways in which the Barcelona city council are using technology highlights, I think, the urgency and value of theorizing this work. I argue it opens the way toward a feminist philosophy of technology.

Framing these developments is the Barcelona Digital City Plan (2015–2019) which includes the important subtitle “Putting technology at the service of the people”. Francesca Bria, the former Digital Innovation Commissioner in the Barcelona City Council who put the Barcelona Digital City Plan into motion explains how the plan aimed to rethink the *Smart City* aiming to transcend its technological objectives to better respond to the needs of the citizens (Bria 2017). Bria notes that cities cannot “solve all our digital problems: many of them need urgent attention at the national and global level. But cities can run smart, data-intensive, algorithmic public transportation, housing, health and education – all based on a logic of *solidarity, social cooperation and collective rights*” (Bria 2018).

An important aspect of the Digital Plan views technology and Big Data as a common good of the city (Bria 2018).<sup>2</sup> Bria explains Barcelona en Comú are “reversing the smart city paradigm” and instead of “extracting all the data we can before thinking about how to use it, we started aligning the tech agenda with the agenda of the city ... We want to move from a model of surveillance capitalism, where data is opaque and not transparent, to a model where citizens themselves can own the data” (Bria 2018).<sup>3</sup> In making city data openly accessible, rather than

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2 “We are introducing clauses into contracts, like data sovereignty and public ownership of data”, says Bria. “For example, now we have a big contract with Vodafone, and every month Vodafone has to give machine readable data to city hall. Before, that didn’t happen. They just took all the data and used it for their own benefit” (2018).

3 “I think in the technological world it’s very important to put forward a narrative that’s different to the surveillance capitalism from Silicon Valley, and the dystopian Chinese model, with its Social

selling it off to corporations, the city helps, as Bria notes, over “13,000 local tech companies to build future data-driven services through a blockchain-based platform that we are developing in the *DECODE* project” (Bria 2017). An explicitly feminist example of this is an app the Barcelona city council has recently launched. It allows people to report sexual harassment which the city council can then evaluate to determine “hot spots” in the city and act accordingly.

The city has also made headway into digital participatory democracy which aims to harness technology to increase participation in the democratic and policy-making process. To do so they are using their own digital platform, Decidim Barcelona (in English “We Decide”). In doing so, the *Smart City* really is being developed from the ground up (Bria 2017). As Bria notes:

Now the public can participate directly in government as they would on social media, by suggesting ideas, debating them, and voting with their thumbs. Decidim taps into the potential of social networks: the information spreading on Twitter, or the relationships on Facebook. All of these apply to politics and Decidim seeks to channel them, while guaranteeing personal privacy and public transparency in a way these platforms don't. (Bria 2018)

Considering these examples that are happening in a feminist city alongside certain feminist philosophical perspectives thus enables us to appreciate how the feminist politics of Barcelona en Comú and their progressive new municipalist governance allows us to hope and imagine the future and relations with others in community differently. Moreover, these are just some of the examples of the ways in which the feminist city council of Barcelona are challenging the neoliberal *Smart City* narrative and creating cultural transformations in everyday lives through institutional politics and policies related to technology. They are creating a fearless feminist city founded upon the ideas of the common good and rethinking social relations through education campaigns and protocols and technology to challenge the neoliberal ideas that there is “no alternative”, offering instead radical emancipatory imaginaries and hope for the future.

Reading these initiatives and, in particular, the core aspects of the Digital Plan I return to consider Grosz's work. Building on Grosz's work I suggest we can think of Bodies-Cities-Technologies as forming relational interface. An interface in which Bodies-Cities-Technologies define and establish each other (Grosz 1995, 108). They are constitutive and mutually defining. The implication of this, is that cities, like bodies, and technologies can be conceived of as gendered and raced and classed. Consequently, we can begin to have a more intimate view on how *Smart Cities*

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Credit System that uses citizen data to give them a rating that then gives them access to certain services”, says Bria. “We want to lead Europe to put forward an alternative model” (2018).

can privilege certain groups of citizens but, on the other hand, rethinking the *Smart City* from a feminist perspective we can begin to imagine how feminist *Smart Cities* can work for the common good. Moreover, if we agree with Grosz's analysis of the importance of the city in the formation of subjectivity and the power the city holds in production of social norms, it seems Barcelona en Comú's Feminist City and Digital Plan is a crucial and central way in which we can challenge the insidiously neoliberal systems that cause harm to us all, but particularly women and gender non-conforming folks and all those that do not fit the mold of the patriarch. Much more theorizing and work is required here to think through the ways in which technology works in the subjectification of Bodies-Cities but given what I have outlined here, I am hopeful that a feminist *Smart City* is on the way to nurturing and producing feminist political subjectivities. To echo Grosz in 1995, however, "only time will tell".

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