Rethinking Relationships Between Public Institutions and Community Initiatives: The Cases of Astra (Gernika) and Karmela (Santutxu, Bilbao)

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Abstract In the Basque Country, popular movement and local community initiatives have precipitated interesting changes in the relationships and the form in which dialogue is conducted between social movements, public administrations, and politicians. Based on two of these initiatives, the objective of this chapter is to analyze alternative models of relationship between public administrations and social movement networks and initiatives. The chapter also draws attention to contributions that the university and the social sciences can make in terms of both facilitating the internal strengthening of community initiatives and increasing their legitimacy with respect to public administrations and other community agents. To this end, we highlight the epistemological importance of studying and increasing the visibility of instances of political creativity. These initiatives make important social contributions including the community management of disused spaces; free training, leisure, and culture activities; places for rehearsal and experimentation; barter, recycling, and responsible consumption; and material and emotional support for marginalized people. However, they also facilitate the democratization of political institutions, expanding the horizon of what is understood as possible and achievable. After contextualizing and briefly presenting the two case studies, we conclude that a careful dialogue between popular initiatives and public administrations facilitates a strengthening of both these spaces and grassroots participatory networks of political participation. These networks contribute to the coexistence of diverse groups and identities; to social cohesion and community connectedness; to social and institutional transformation; and to the de-commodification and de-bureaucratization of spaces for the

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exercise of civil rights and for the self-managed satisfaction of social and cultural needs.

Taking democracy seriously means not just taking it
    beyond the borders of liberal democracy, but
    also in transforming the concept itself:
    Democracy as the entire process of transforming relationships
    of unequal power into relationships of shared authority – (Santos, 2010: 172).

1   Introduction

The theoretical reflection and investigative practice carried out by the Parte Hartuz [Take Part] research group (University of the Basque Country, EHU/UPV) has led us to define participation as something more than being present or even taking part or intervening in a citizen-based or institutional process. We understand participation as a process of organization and mobilization of a community of people and collective agents in which there is a conscious adoption of a role as active creators of a shared future. We could say that well before the term participation gained importance in political rhetoric, there was already a long and uninterrupted history of initiatives that burst into the public sphere from below. Their demands and initiatives responded to collective needs and have caused changes in the practices of power and in relationships between rulers and the ruled.

The type of autonomous and spontaneous participation that gives rise to movements and networks of collective action has been a central factor in experiences of very different kinds. In this article we are interested in reflecting on experiences that have given rise to changes in power relations and which have shifted the structure of the relationship between governments and public administrations and self-organized collective action networks. These citizen networks, even without institutional recognition, identify themselves as legitimate political agents with the right and capacity to intervene in the community and public spheres. In the specific context of the Basque Country, there have been important experiences of this type. The political practices developed in these cases are creating different models of relationship between community initiatives and public administrations.

As a participatory action research group, we have had the opportunity to collaborate with and therefore partake in lessons learned in the cases of Astra (Gernika) and Karmela (Santutxu, Bilbao). The objective of this work is to reflect on alternative models of relationships between public administrations and collective action networks and actions.

In the first section of this article, we present a framework for reflection on the opportunities and limits that we perceive both in the institutional sphere and in that of community initiatives, on the basis of some of the underlying rationales which

operate in each area. In a second section, we contextualize and briefly describe the experiences of Astra and Karmela, which serve as empirical points of reference to reflect on the relationship between these two areas of political intervention. We also take time to outline the tools and methodologies that the social sciences can contribute to facilitate both participatory processes and synergies between different activists and social organizations, as well as in relationships between movements and public institutions, neighborhood and commercial associations, and other social agents. In the final section, we outline our understanding of the role of public administrations in processes of participative community action, as well as the types of relationships that we understand to be most fruitful in terms of promoting creativity and political innovation. Movement in this direction would bring us closer a deeper practice of democracy, understood as an always unfinished process of popular leadership and transformation of unequal power relations.

2 Popular Movements: Opportunities and Limits in the Institutional Sphere

Here we present a general conceptualization and characterization of collective action and popular movements. These movements have been defined in very different ways. As Laraña (1999) emphasizes, the definition or theoretical delimitation of these agents has been discussed extensively, and each study highlights different aspects and dimensions. Zibechi (2007), for example, states that every popular movement seeks to question and shift social inertias by resisting general the acceptance of the relationship dynamics and social positions that the prevailing order assigns to certain social sectors. Riechmann (2001), for his part, defines movements as collective agents that intervene in social transformation and suggests that "there seems to be a consensus when it comes to pointing out that social movements involve both a strengthening of public space and a process of social revitalization" (Riechmann, 2001: 46).

The specialized literature emphasizes that popular movements question current power relations and that they carry out critical readings of reality in order to radically change asymmetries of various kinds. Martínez et al. (2012) focus on the fact that popular movements, in addition to showing a critical attitude toward the social order and its asymmetries and injustices, try to recreate life according to other logics, that is, they try to promote new models of relationships, organization, and coexistence through their political practices.

There is a broad consensus between different approaches and currents around the more open definition proposed by Diani: "Social movements are differentiated social processes consisting of mechanisms through which actors engage in collective action: (1) They engage in conflictive relationships with clearly identified opponents; (2) They are linked in dense informal networks; (3) They share a differentiated collective identity" (Della Porta & Diani, 2011: 43). Three concepts stand out in this definition: oppositional collective action, compact informal networks, and

collective identity. The authors emphasize that in the dimension of oppositional collective action, popular movements are involved in political and cultural conflicts and that they promote social change and/or directly engage a specific point of conflict. As to collective identity, the authors suggest that movements are differentiated by their ability to build networks. Specifically, as they carry out activities and actions, their networks expand and new adhesions are generated. Shared commitments promoted by movement generate a shared identity and common goal.

Informal and compact networks are another characteristic feature of these agents. As is recognized by Della Porta and Diani (2011: 44), a social movement takes place to the extent that both individual and organized actors engage in continuous exchanges of resources and the pursuit of common goals without losing their autonomy or independence.

To contextualize the two cases that we present later, we believe that it is essential to characterize, on the one hand, the behavior of social movements toward institutions and to describe the prevailing logic in the institutional sphere.

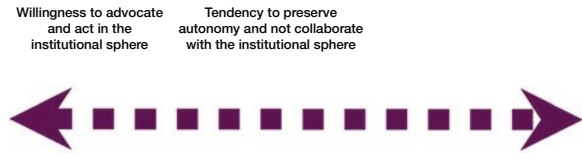## 2.1   Political Behavior of Social Movements Confronting the Institutional Sphere

There is not a clear consensus within or across social movements as to how to engage with public administrations and the established political system. We would, therefore, like to draw attention to this area of debate. The analytical framework summarized below outlines two opposed positions present within social movements in relation to this question.

Importantly, these are not static positions. We want to make it clear that the two perspectives or trends identified here are better understood as belonging to a *continuum* with multiple intermediate positions, some tending toward one of the poles and others more to the opposite. On the one hand, one perspective priorities the re-appropriation of institutions. From this position, movements propose for themselves a privileged speaking position and protagonism within institutions, on this basis of which new models of institutional governance can be implemented. The proposals emerging from this position include governance networks with a leading role occupied by civil society and organized citizens.

On the other end of the spectrum, the autonomy of popular movements is underlined and vindicated. Models of participatory democracy are systematically critiqued, and collective action is emphasized as a generator of autonomous spaces built from below. The self-organization of the community and the creation of autonomous spaces by and for organized civil society are defended (Fig. 1).

The latter position places more importance on the construction of emancipatory strategies that are created autonomously, that is, on approaches and processes that create community self-organization. These insist on a need to move away from the

Fig. 1 Political behaviors of social movements confronting the institutional sphere. (Source: Authors)

Willingness to advocate and act in the institutional sphere

Tendency to preserve autonomy and not collaborate with the institutional sphere

liberal logic of the market and the state and are reticent about the efficacy of dialogue with established institutions. Zibechi states that from this point of view, institutional settings and structures represent serious limits to the construction of emancipatory processes. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, throughout the South American continent, a situation emerged in which progressive left forces gained access to government. The Uruguayan thinker notes that this apparent success constituted an unprecedented challenge for social movements (Zibechi, 2007: 25). He emphasizes that in some countries progressive forces' rise to power weakened social movements through the cooptation of some sectors and the isolation of others. He therefore tries to extract lessons from these experiences to avoid fragmentation of different sectors engaged in social struggle.

Thinkers on the anti-institutional end of the spectrum prioritize the construction of relationships of solidarity while maintaining the autonomy of action and thought of social movements. We are here describing networks that prioritize the establishment and maintenance of spaces outside general social organization that seek to build their own spaces for consumption, leisure, ideology, and, in the end, life (Ibarra et al., 2002: 252).

On the other hand, the voices that position themselves in favor of collaboration with the institutional sphere consider this collaborative advocacy and transformation work legitimate and necessary. They are in favor of shared governance, aligning themselves in favor of *policy making* (Ibarra et al., 2002). Therefore, they participate in the established spaces of deliberation as part of an attempted transformation of institutional logic. They consider participatory processes to be means of expanding the reach and agency of social agents.

From both perspectives, both inside and outside the institutional sphere, the democratizing function of popular movements stands out. In other words, special emphasis is placed on the work carried out by movements as a tool to regenerate institutional logic.

In any case, beyond painting these different views regarding public administration as a dichotomy, we want to hold onto the idea of the *continuum*. That is to say, although we have polarized two opposing positions for explanatory purposes, we understand that in each context and experience, there are multiple intermediate and nuanced positions that, fortunately, complicate and enrich this false dichotomy.

2.2 *Characteristics of the Institutional Sphere*

According to García Linera (2016: 12), the state consists of an institutional network distinguished by three characteristics: (1) The state is the political correlation of forces between social classes and blocks; (2) the state is a machinery through which decisions, regulations, bureaucracies, and hierarchies are materialized; and (3) the state is a collective idea, part of the common sense of the current era, which guarantees moral consent between the rulers and the ruled.

Santos (2005), Ibarra (2011), and García Linera (2016) stress the need to rethink the state and highlight the contributions that popular movements can make in this area. They develop different proposals for the reinvention of the state that aspire to the transformation of organizational structures, resource management, and decision-making. Among the difficulties in achieving this, they highlight the increasingly limited sovereignty of states and their institutions. The power of parliaments and governments vis-à-vis international markets and institutions has been steady declining.

These authors also draw attention to deficiencies in the institutional sphere that are the result of bureaucratization and the internal logic of the administration. A tendency toward bureaucratization and departmentalization, as well as the elitism of the administration, makes the political and administrative regeneration of institutions very difficult. Starting in the 1970s, the crisis of the Weberian model opened the doors to new public management, which is deeply influenced by neoliberalism. The logic of the market was applied, therefore, in bureaucratic models. The weakness of the state is not a secondary or unintended effect of the globalization of the economy according to Santos (2005: 315) but the result of a political process that tries to confer to the state another type of force, a force more subtly adjusted to the political demands of global capitalism. In this context, Santos identifies a need for cooperation between the state and civil society to combat neoliberal logic. For this reason, he underlines that a reform of the state is necessary in close collaboration with collective action networks.

We want to emphasize, however, that there is a constitutive tension between (1) social movements as sudden and intense political forces and practices that seek to shift established norms beyond their internal limits and, therefore, take on a transgressive dynamic (they are creative forces with non-conventional repertoires of proposal and action) and (2) political forces and practices framed in regulating sets of rules and legal, procedural, and administrative requirements, within the established institutional framework.

Social movements can be understood as a democratic overflow "from below" (popular sectors marginalized by different social conditions) over established institutions. This defines from the outset a conflictive tension between social movements and political-state representation, affecting both parties.

To this the emancipatory transformations must be added that many social movements aspire today, anti-capitalist, pro-sovereignty, feminist, environmentalist, food sovereignty, and others. These are not only a matter of decrees, laws, or public

policies but also of transformations of the everyday social relations and of the dominant models of life. For social movements, the focal points of conflict are distributed across multiple life spaces and not limited to the direct contestation of governmental power. Their perspective on power and emancipatory transformation is not restricted to advocacy – much less the *seizure of power* – in an institutional political context. There is a self-distancing from the vision of power and social transformation associated with leftist political parties.

Social movements, depending on the correlation of forces and the development of a political conflict, can reach the point of decentering the structures of institutionalized political system. In fact, processes of democratization or democratic intensification are processes of intense political dispute in which the hegemonic sectors are forced to open up and discuss previously unquestionable issues, with previously excluded political subjects.

There are many experiences in which social movements have become part of the machinery of the system, and this has led them to take on multiple and different challenges, as determined by context. However, we could say that there is a common trend. Movements can influence spaces of institutional political participation directly and indirectly. They can negotiate the scope, meanings, and contents of public policies, for example. However, this is always within a framework given by established institutions, which in most cases does not encompass the most fundamental demands and objective of the movements. Undoubtedly, these processes expand the democratic framework, disrupting the relations of power and hegemony. However, they are also political processes in which dominant sectors, in order to maintain their authority, try to recalibrate mechanisms of control by integrating emerging political subjects into existing institutions. These mitigate the potential of movements to subvert the power relations and hegemonies that maintain institutional hierarchies as a whole.

Moments in which a restructuring of power accompanies a co-option of social movements can be understood as a political danger. However, if a rigid anti-institutional stance is maintained, a movement faces the dangers of isolation, invisibility, and political insignificance. In other words, some cases are characterized by a rejection of institutions and their political agents on principle. This position might be adopted in order not to fall into political rationales foreign to those of the movement itself or to avoid becoming "contaminated." The dangers here can be associated with self-isolation and difficulties in terms of generating visible and sustained transformation. Similarly, a movement's ability to connect with society as a whole can be diminished, and this may lead to difficulties mobilizing a politically significant segment of the population. A rejection of institutions can make movements victims of their own political marginality and increase their exposure and vulnerability to institutional control and repression. A movement can become restricted to closed groups, almost cliques, with little political impact. This lack of impact does not, however, delegitimize the dignity of an ongoing creative drive toward emancipatory transformation.

Above we described some of the elements that can help us understand the often difficult and tense relationship between social movements and institutions, as well

as the rejection, distance, or mistrust that movements sometimes maintain with respect to institutions and institutional political agents. The degree of distance maintained between movements and institutions is subject to frequent shifts and reassessment in response to particular contexts and conflicts. Popular mobilization itself produces changes in the correlation of forces and legitimacy of movements vis-à-vis institutions.

We understand that their ability to establish autonomous relationships with institutions is an element that helps to enhance the emancipatory character of social movements. This can be achieved without falling into cooptation on the one hand or isolation or self-exclusion on the other. Self-exclusion can weaken a movement's capacity for political influence within institutions as a disputed terrain and in society as a whole. In the following section, we describe the two case studies on which our analysis is based.

3 Spaces for Collaboration Between Collective Action Networks and Public Administrations

Two collaborations between community initiatives and the university research team Parte Hartuz (UPV/EHU) are presented below. These collaborations represent the key points of reference for the learning and reflection detailed in this paper. The research group participated in two areas. On the one hand, this included the accompaniment of participatory processes of coordination and reflection between different organizations and social activists. Specifically, this meant supporting the preparation of methodologies for and participation in the dynamization of assemblies, meetings, and work sessions. On the other hand, it included conducting specific studies to improve outreach and participation in community spaces. Finally, it has included the facilitation of conversations and negotiations with public administrations and other social, political, and commercial organizations in the region (neighborhood organizations).

As detailed below, collaboration with university has had a dual role. On the one hand, it was related to the strengthening of processes of coordination, reflection, and joint work between different activists and social organizations. On the other hand, it was linked to support and legitimation in relations with public administrations and other organized sectors of society.

3.1 Context: The Case of Astra

Astra was an initiative led by groups and associations in the municipality of Gernika (17,016 inhabitants, 2019) to reclaim an old arms factory closed in 1998 and to create a space open to the public and their social and cultural initiatives. At the end of 2005 and during 2006, after several occupations, evictions, and mobilizations,

different participatory processes were initiated by the social groups that had occupied the building. A team from the University of the Basque Country provided support for the facilitation of these processes. In 2012, the Astra factory was successfully converted to a public community space self-managed by the Astra Coordinating Assembly. The project is currently operational and connects a number of different collectives and individuals.

The driving force behind the entire experience was the Coordinating Assembly, which called for different levels of support and collaboration from the University and public administrations. Astra represents a sociopolitical experience that combines different elements of interest. The initiative was launched by activist collectives, which convened and facilitated participatory processes open to citizens and the entire network of citizen associations. These processes coordinated and strengthened broad and diverse social networks. This in turn made it possible to establish a dialogue with public administrations in which the popular initiative enjoyed sufficient legitimacy to be respected and supported.

Public institutions have allowed the popular initiative to continue in peace and to act autonomously, although this relationship has not been without difficulties and tensions. They have also supported the project financially, funding the rehabilitation and maintenance of the building. Both the Gernika local council and the Basque Government (both institutions presided over by governments from different political tendencies over the period under discussion, 2005–2020) have accepted the foresight shown by the popular initiative, both in terms of their capacity for action (occupation of the building, social mobilization) and their capacity to draw up proposals and projects, at a time when government institutions had not developed any concrete project for the space. Astra activists underline some key dynamics when analyzing the trajectory of the project and the lessons learned. These include their ability to anticipate the reaction of institutions when squatting an abandoned building and converting it for sociocultural use. They also refer to their ability to define a project for that building in a way that was open to the wider social fabric and people of Gernika. This is linked to a capacity to mobilize people, through demonstrations, press conferences, and statements of support from recognized public figures in the spheres of culture and human rights. Linked to the above, participatory processes were developed as part of a methodology for political work from and for the community. This made it possible to develop these projects through open and heterogeneous processes and empowering and cohesive forms of work. Further, these processes were also endorsed and legitimized by a facilitation group linked to the local university.

Two key factors emerged. The first encompassed the abovementioned progressive strengthening and legitimation of the initiative through social mobilization and the successful identification of support legitimizing the initiative. This involved attracting both direct participation and statements of support, as well as resources and alliances to carry out the facilitation of participatory processes. Secondly, the centrality of these participatory processes themselves was critical in the popular and collective construction of proposals and projects. These two factors were determinant in ensuring that public administration took the popular initiatives seriously,

allowing them to continue self-organizing and, finally, providing financial support. This support was given without strings, respecting the autonomous and self-managed nature of the initiative, without imposing ideological or normative (bureaucratic) considerations that would distort the autonomous and popular character of the project.

As to the tools and resources deployed by the university team, collaboration between the Astra Coordinating Assembly and University of the Basque Country working group consisted above all in the accompaniment and facilitation of emergent participatory processes. This participation began at the request of the Coordinating Assembly. It was aware of the University Working Group's experience in the dynamization of community processes and participatory action research in different towns and cities in the Basque Country. Due to the large number and diverse cross section of groups and people with different perspectives and ways of working who wanted to participate in participatory processes being developed as part of the Astra project, the Coordinating Assembly reached out to the university team for support in this area.

3.2   Context: The Case of Karmela

Karmela is a community project rooted in the Bilbao neighborhood of Santutxu (pop. 34,083, 2019). In November 2015, different groups decided to reactivate the Ikastola Karmelo, an old disused educational center. Karmela defines itself as a community project for the common good that, overcoming the public-private dichotomy, is committed to collective ownership and community management of public spaces. Its aim is to address the sociocultural needs of the residents of Santutxu and Bilbao.

The objectives and activities of this project were agreed on through a series of different process of reflection carried out by activists from different organizations and groups. As an outcome of this process, different activities and initiatives are currently being carried out in this self-managed space. These include a library and study spaces; free Basque language (Euskara) classes; a gym and climbing wall for sports activities; cultural and political conferences and events; and recreational gatherings (popular meals at neighborhood celebrations, children's birthdays). There is also temporary accommodation for migrants in transit.

The facilities already present in the old school building (patio, traditional Basque ball court, classrooms, dining room, kitchen, cinema) have become public meeting spaces for coexistence between diverse equals, creating relationships and bonds. There is a multiplicity of initiatives and social demands. In short, it is a community project that reinforces the social fabric and offers spaces for intergenerational and intercultural encounters and free cultural activities for the poor. Therefore, it is a general social good which increases community cohesion and strengthens mutual support networks to confront discrimination and exclusions derived from economic, cultural, and gender inequalities.

Karmela's organizing assembly defines the pillars and challenges that characterize this project as follows:

1. Diversity and openness. Within the Karmela project, neighbors of different ages, sex and origins, cultures, languages, and interests come together. Therefore, coexistence based on mutual knowledge and respect is key. Acting locally and thinking globally, Karmela seeks to become an example of a project enjoying wide participation for Bilbao and Basque Country, without losing its specific local connection with the suburb of Santutxu.
2. Construction of transformative alternatives. Karmela has emerged to offer an alternative which meets the real needs of its neighbors. In Karmela, popular models are encouraged to build and manage the commons, over and above the dominant mercantilist model and logic, and to organize and empower different initiatives. The project shows that it is possible to build something needed for the good of the majority and has proven that it is feasible to build projects through communal work. Fundamental to the Karmela project are libertarian values, because not only the acts and ambitions materialized through the project but also the means of achieving these are transformative. In Karmela, collective interest prevails over private interests. The capital of the project is the dedication and work of neighbors and citizens and also the collective benefit produced as a result of the relationships and collaboration between individuals and groups.
3. By and for the people. This project encourages neighborhood participation, but not only in the initiatives or activities it organizes. In Karmela, neighbors are active, creating subjects, and, therefore, citizens are not understood as mere spectators or consumers. Karmela is rebuilt every day through the abilities and desires of each participant. It is also a space for popular projects that individual creators wish to carry out and to generate synergies between these people and projects. People need to form networks, and, thus, Karmela is conceived of as a space for mutual enrichment in different skills and values. More than a physical space, it is a project that facilitates the identification and formation of networks between agents and has the ability to generate comfortable areas to work. In addition, it maintains close ties and collaborates with various groups that work in favor of social transformation in other areas.

3.3   Contributions from the University

This paper has so far presented the two case studies that serve as points of reference for rethinking the relationship between public administrations and collective action networks and the role that university working groups can play in the negotiation of that relationship. It now goes into detail with respect to the specific contributions made by the university team for each case. Collaboration with the popular and community initiatives has involved four types of task or contribution:

1. The facilitation of meetings and assemblies through dynamics and participatory methodologies derived from theory and experiences with popular education and the facilitation of organizational processes. The university team has been able to contribute very useful tools and frameworks for facilitating and coordinating the work of large and heterogeneous assemblies in which there is a marked diversity of age, political trajectory, ideology, and work culture. These methodologies and ways of working seek to guarantee equal participation and a collective development of analysis, strategies, and initiatives, based on the different needs felt on a daily basis by the people participating in an assembly. They take special care to maintain an environment of respect, acceptance, and trust, in which all participants feel comfortable because (1) They have the same opportunities to speak and make contributions; (2) listening is mutual, respectful, and equal; and (3) it is felt that all contributions (each in its own style and mode of expression) are equally important and equally considered in agreements and decision-making processes. This leads to a feeling of acceptance and legitimacy in the space which in turn creates the trust, ownership, and level of agreement demanded by collective work and cooperation.

2. The documentation and systematization of popular knowledge: the documentation of debates and resolutions adopted in minutes, audio recordings, and other media. Through these means, the ideas and proposals generated in different meetings and assemblies are organized into documents and workflow diagrams, making it possible to provide continuity to processes in a sustained and ongoing manner. This includes the identification of tensions and disagreements and the formulation of proposals to address these disagreements considering their rational (needs, interests, expectations, etc.) and emotional (illusions, doubts, fears, etc.) dimensions, so that the process of reflection and community organization does not become blocked.

3. The execution of specific studies to improve the scope and dissemination of initiatives: surveys, discussion groups, and participatory workshops are used to analyze different perceptions generated by a community initiative among populations at furthest from those within social networks affiliated with the project. Other works are aimed at awareness raising and communication of the open nature of the community space. Its objective is to avoid endogamous inertias and increase the likelihood of activating different social sectors and promoting their agency in social, cultural, and political activities.

4. The facilitation of meetings and negotiations with state institutions and neighborhood committees. Relationships with government institutions and other local officials, including building administrators and representatives of neighborhood committees, can be difficult and tense. This can sometimes be traced back to the lack of institutional recognition of social movement projects, the ever-present temptation to use repression, and the difficulty with which spontaneous eruptions of popular agency can be made to fit within existing legal frameworks. At other times, tensions can be linked to the inconvenience that the organization of activities and events that bring together a large number of people can generate in everyday life. Ideological discrepancies, conflicting interests, and a lack of

understanding also make up part of the picture. All of these factors come into play when defining a framework for acceptance and coexistence. Our experience shows that university support for popular initiatives strengthens their legitimacy and increases their recognition by other agents, which establishes more symmetrical and favorable conditions for dialogue, listening, and understanding. In addition, a well-thought-out proposal for a dialogue and a careful methodology for organizing and moderating these conversations facilitates the search for negotiated agreements and a shared definition of responsibilities.

The university is an agent that can play a relevant role in strengthening collective action networks and their initiatives. This is shown through these types of tasks and activities which are carried out in collaboration with activists and social groups that lead community initiatives. Through this collaboration, the university fulfills its purpose of providing a public service and acts with social responsibility. This is also confirmed in the recognition received by the social movements which have collaborated with the university team in dialogue with the public administration. We fully understand that these collaborative and supportive relationships are two-way. The activism of the people who participate in different collectives and initiatives is also a source of knowledge. This allows us to exchange, learn, and integrate theoretical reflection with praxis. It enriches our teaching and research work with experiences that keep us in touch with the contradictions and difficulties which are part of real-world practices of intervention in and construction of the social and political.

These are times in which research is enmeshed in a competition for "excellence," and institutional evaluation agencies grant recognition for research work based on publications in "high impact" global journals, with rankings controlled by a few multinationals. Thus, the expansion of market liberalism in the academic sphere has promoted fierce competition between individuals that feeds into dynamics of curriculum stuffing, self-citation, and narcissism. This hinders and marginalizes work carried out through collective and not individual efforts, oriented toward cooperation with agents with few resources, and whose impact and value are felt at a local level. When it falls into these dynamics, the university loses touch with its obligations as a public service. The imperative to disseminate critical thinking, analytical resources, and operational tools for a more cohesive and just society is pushed to the margins. We understand that public universities, as non-profit institutions financed with public resources, hold an obligation to serve the general interest. This can be contrasted with both individual career ambitions and those of collaborating private entities motivated by the for-profit logic of the market. Priority should, therefore, be given to collaboration with processes and agents motivated by general social interests that seek to improve the living conditions of the population as a whole. These very agents often experience worst living conditions because they have fewer resources and opportunities and less power to advocate for their interests.

Although there is a lack of academic and institutional recognition of the type of social transfer we have described in this work, this is more than compensated for by the gratitude and recognition received from the organizations, social activists, and political leaders with whom we collaborate and learn together. Indeed, this type of contribution from the university to its immediate social context gives a degree of

satisfaction beyond that of simply doing one's job. It also gives back both in terms of knowledge and teaching. Knowledge emerges from working grounded in the muddy complexity of real sociopolitical processes. Teaching is enhanced since classroom practices are nourished by what has been learned through working in these processes, with all their ambiguities.

Finally, we return to the central axis of this section and the role that the university can play in the coordination and collaboration between collective action networks and public administration. The two experiences that we have presented in this article have facilitated learning that can be summarized as follows. First, the prioritization of dialogue and collaboration between popular initiatives, the university, and public administrations had permitted the construction of spaces and community dynamics capable of responding to general social interests, that is, the combined work of these different agents has facilitated the strengthening of community dynamics of mutual support, exchange, interdependence, and noncompetitive, collaborative work.

Thus, from this prioritization of collaboration between the public sector and the community, it is possible to de-commodify and de-bureaucratize processes of responding to social needs, strengthening nonprofit, noncompetitive, and excessively normative work spaces. With all its successes, mistakes, difficulties, and contradictions, this process is fundamentally about open access to spaces by all social sectors. This means removing and administrative and material limitations on participation that generate exclusions or elitisms.

Furthermore, in a context in which social inequalities and violence derived from sexism, classism, and racism are increasing, it is important to value community spaces as strategic spaces for the exercise of civil and political rights of organization and participation. Spaces such as those presented in the case studies above promote coexistence, bring together diverse groups and identities, facilitate relationships, and thus favor integration and social cohesion.

4 The Role of Public Administrations

Over the last 30 years, local politics have evolved in a way which has been marked by citizens' obtainment of greater political centrality (Ajangiz & Blas, 2008; Subirats & Parés, 2014). We share the view that citizens have been gaining sociopolitical prominence at the local level since the 1980s. There has been an evolution from traditional forms of representative government, leading to new forms of participatory governance that confront the crisis of the representative system. This transformation has led to some innovative community management practices of public spaces.

Along these lines, in the Basque Country, there have been some cases in which alternative models of public community relationships have emerged. These have generated alternatives to the public-private model that still prevails. The cases of Astra in Gernika and Karmela in Bilbao are two examples of this.

We refer here to emerging practices, closely linked to the concept of social democratization, which is aligned with the principles of participation and self-organization to meet social needs through autonomous organization. These processes erupt from the bottom up. Civil society agents who share objectives and demands come together to respond to shared problems. They carry out and promote democratizing practices that empower and help transform power relations that exist between the rulers and the ruled.

What is new in these cases is the role that public administrations can and are playing. In 2017, the Barcelona Provincial Council, in Catalonia, published a report containing interesting statements based on a process of reflection that the organization carried out with respect to the role of public administrations in participatory processes. This publication highlights five major challenges for institutions in the area of citizen participation in local politics. They can be summarized as follows (Diputació Barcelona, 2017: 22):

1. There is a need to redefine the concept of citizen participation so as to also consider processes that are created outside public administrations. There is a need to activate, facilitate, and collaborate in these processes involving administrations together with the community.
2. The challenge is to adopt new practices of policy co-production and ensure collaboration between public administrations and civil society.
3. There is a need to incorporate new information and communication technologies and to use these new technologies to guarantee transparency and to create new spaces for the production of public policies.
4. There is also a need to reformulate the current institutional architectures of participation, creating new, more flexible, and less bureaucratic formats.
5. Finally, there is a need to face the challenge of internally reorganizing local administrations. To this end management processes should be adapted to ensure that participatory activities are developed in a coordinated manner.

This type of reflection has also been carried out in the Basque Country, albeit on a smaller scale. We can cite the Bherria program, carried out by the Department of Employment and Social Policies of the Basque Government together with the Basque Council for Volunteering. The Bherria program was rolled out in September 2017 and aims to explore and promote new forms of public-social relationship. As a first challenge, it sought to address the community management of public spaces. The basic conclusions of this program have been summarized in ten key points for public-social collaboration and the promotion of active citizenship and volunteering by public administrations. As to the role of the public administrations, we would highlight the following point (Aprendizajes Bherria, 2017: 11):

> From public administrations we are reaching out to citizens through participatory processes. We are learning and improving the means by which we do this, but we need to work at a structural level to facilitate a logic of participation. This means going beyond specific processes and making participation part of our operational logic. It means getting outside our comfort zones, activating conversations, sharing power and taking some risks.

In order for the logic of participation to become the operating logic of public administrations, it is necessary, in addition to what has already been commented, to make resources available to citizens and their networks so that they can contribute to the common good (Adams & Hess, 2008: 3–4). For this reason, it is necessary to approach public administration not from its management aspect but from the perspective of the social and political function that it fulfills. Guaranteeing and developing the rights and freedoms of citizens should be its mission and by these means fulfilling its role in strengthening democracy. The OCD itself identifies a necessity for the public sector "to redefine its relationship with society; build a new legitimacy and a new narrative of the public as plural and integrated; to acquire new knowledge, skills and resources to face new social needs and demands (...)" (2018, p. 18, Cited in Arenilla & Delgado, 2019, p. 37).

In short, we are talking about processes of centering citizens and their ability to make decisions around public and shared spaces. This is part of recovering the relationship between life and politics (Federici, 2010). We are talking about putting processes of democratic deepening into practice through shared management practices developed in an open, shared, and participatory manner. To this end, as Innerarity points out, it is necessary to establish inclusive administrations. This inclusiveness "can be considered the most appropriate concept of democratic administration insofar as administration is understood as an open system that incorporates into its logic the influence that civil society can exert on it" (2020: 186).

5   Conclusions

Through our experiences with the Karmela and Astra projects, we have identified some key points around the role of public administrations in these types of process. We summarize these below.

On the one hand, public administrations demonstrate a lack of recognition of the social agents who participate in collective action networks that lead disruptive and emergent participative processes. For this reason, we believe that it is of vital importance first to recognize the legitimate role of these social agents and, secondly, to prioritize dialogue and work in common with them.

We believe that participation is increasingly being redefined through these emergent, disruptive processes, and that is why acceptance and facilitation of, and collaboration with, these processes is necessary on the part of public administrations.

In the two cases analyzed, work was done so that administrations came to realize that they had to grant prominence and centrality to the collective action networks that took part in this type of process and accept them as priority collaborators. The fifth annex of the agreement, which transferred the management of the old El Karmelo school from Bilbao City Council to the popular coordinating committee of the Karmela Project, states:

> The relationship between the City Council and the Karmela project will be based on respect and, therefore, the project itself, its modes of organization, needs and rhythms, with words and deeds, will be respected. In this sense, paternalistic and authoritarian attitudes will be avoided when confronting problems that may arise. The relationship between the City Council and Karmela will be governed by the organizational form of this popular initiative.

A second key point would be to allow these projects to develop as decided by the participants in these collective processes, without interference. In the case of these projects, the administration's job is to accommodate and protect, both legally and financially. Through these experiences we have verified that when the social agents so request, as has been the case with Astra, administrations should support these processes with financial resources. They must also accept that, while maintaining transparency and openness to the public as a whole, the managers of these community spaces are the agents of these networks of collective and community action. The management of both Astra and Karmela is under the direct control of the people who are part of these projects and not local government administrations. The role of these institutions is to facilitate and not obstruct. In the case of Karmela, the first annex of the assignment of use agreement ceding the use of the building to the organizing collective states (2020):

> The Karmela project is a community project that is rooted in the neighborhood and identifies itself as a common good. The objectives and actions of this project have been agreed upon through different dynamics and participatory reflections that have been carried out between citizens and neighbors since 2015, and constitute the construction of innovative alternative projects that identify and satisfy the basic needs of the community.

A further conclusion to which this paper arrives is to emphasize that public administrations can facilitate and take charge of bureaucratic procedures. In the cases of Astra and Karmela, the work carried out by public administrations to simplify bureaucratic codes and thus facilitate the understanding of this operating logic has been important. It has also been necessary to find a balance between formal rigidity and informal laxity, in favor of the viability of projects. Innerarity (2020: 191) states that the complexity and inflexibility of administrative bureaucratic procedures enforces a principle of generality and does not admit arbitrary decisions. However, this can also imply possible weaknesses, especially in terms of an inability to learn or carry out much needed transformations.

That public administrations took charge of bureaucratic procedures has been very positive in the two cases we have been involved with, especially when it came to formalizing agreements and the administrative transfer of use and cession of the spaces.

The way in which administrations have conceded prominence and power in order to enable community management of public spaces has also been key. It is true that from a neoliberal point of view, there is a certain temptation to let the community manage its own spaces simply in order to reduce public expenditure and cease to offer this public service. However, in the two cases under discussion, it does not appear that this factor significantly influenced local government. In both cases the impetus to autonomous management clearly emerged from the social movement

networks themselves. Especially in early phases, local governments resisted and placed obstacles in the path of this management model. The efforts and commitment of popular and community initiatives made autonomous management possible. This demanded ongoing struggle to defend the direct agency of citizens and widen democratic participation in the public sector. This is clearly identifiable in the fourth point of the agreement between the municipality of Gernika and the Astra Coordinating Assembly.

> Astra is a space that encourages the direct participation of people in the management of public heritage. (...) This includes artistic production, social initiatives, critical thinking and the dissemination of ideas and actions that seek the democratization of the public sphere.

Finally, we want to emphasize that in order to rethink citizen participation in an innovative way, it is necessary to create a new culture in public administrations, at both technical and political levels. As stated by Subirats and Parés (2014: 11), these experiences of political participation from below create initiatives and alternative solutions that government administrations do not permit. They decide and act outside the official decision-making structures. The self-management of empty spaces, community gardens, consumer cooperatives, and other collaborative experiments of this type exemplify this pro-active dimension of citizenship in search of solutions to social problems and needs. This work can be supported by institutions and public administrations as long as they are able to see themselves as living systems, predisposed to improvement, learning, and collaboration. They must show openness to community initiatives that broaden the diversity of approaches and responses to social needs.

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