

# Conjunctural municipalism and the struggle for Zagreb: Hegemony, crisis, articulation, praxis

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## Abstract

There is renewed interest in conjunctural approaches within urban studies, human geography and beyond to help interpret the troubles of the political present. Moves have been made to specify and systematise a methodological remit for conjunctural analysis, yet there is a risk of losing the political impulse motivating such approaches. As such, this article brings together different intellectual and political currents informing

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conjunctural analysis to posit an alternative heuristic attuned towards social and political intervention. We frame this through four key concepts – hegemony, crisis, articulation and praxis – each explored as the ‘causes’ of conjunctural thinking, understood capaciously as purpose, nature, method and form, and not only origin and explanation. In doing so, we offer a practical framework for a conjunctural action-research agenda refocused on generating theory that is useful for place-based struggles. Focusing on how new municipalist politics are transforming the urban political economy of Zagreb, Croatia, we demonstrate how this framing by hegemony, crisis, articulation and praxis can illuminate the shifting balance of forces faced by activists – and how these may be turned to tactical advantage – to, in turn, shed light on conjunctural thinking as a promising theory and method for praxis. Analysing the new municipalist movement, in Zagreb and beyond, as both a product of the current conjuncture – as *conjunctural municipalism* – and as a deeply conjunctural strategy made in response to crisis conditions and opportunities – as *municipalist conjuncturalism* – we conclude by suggesting possible ways forward for the kinds of conjunctural methods and politics so urgently needed.

## Keywords

conjuncture, crisis, Gramsci, municipalism, praxis

## Introduction

In 2017, the future mayor of Zagreb, Tomislav Tomašević, surmounted the city’s notoriously over-spilling waste landfill site, stuck his new municipalist party’s flag into the summit and proclaimed: ‘the battle for Zagreb begins on this hill!’ This iconic moment in Zagreb’s recent history marked the launch of *Zagreb je Naš!* (ZjN, ‘Zagreb is Ours!’) and the beginning of the conjunctural turning point between two periods and ideologies of rule: the two-decade-long reign of Milan Bandić, a corrupt, clientelist, populist, crony-capitalist mayor, and the incoming eco-socialist, citizen-led and transparency-championing municipalist movement represented by ZjN and led by left-green activists such as Tomašević (Milan, 2023; Sarnow and Tiedemann, 2023). The Jakuševac landfill site symbolised all that was wrong with Zagreb and, by extension, Croatia – for Croatia’s capital city, with around a quarter of its population and spending power greater than the combined budgets of all other municipalities, dominates the national political economy (Hoffmann et al., 2017: 49). As an essential public infrastructure left to rot, Jakuševac was a daily reminder of the corruption and incompetence of the Bandić regime and a symbol of the crisis of social reproduction and of political legitimacy – thus the perfect site from which to launch a conjunctural attack on hegemony.

By assailing this noxious mountain of waste, ZjN signalled their ambitions to clean up the city – both ecologically and politically. Corruption was to be tackled, byzantine bureaucracies rationalised, streets cleaned, systems for processing waste remade green and modern. In 2021, ZjN was elected to office and began the challenging task of governing from the left, and unravelling decades of clientelism and neoliberal financialisation built on the wreckage of the bloody break-up of socialist Yugoslavia. They had only got this far through a strategic approach aimed at articulating a broad-based coalition around shared concerns centred on the foundational infrastructure of everyday life, notably waste management; a strategic approach deeply informed by conjunctural thinking – that is, praxis oriented towards rearticulating the balance of forces for subaltern struggles for hegemony. This article shines a light on the municipalist struggle in Zagreb through a conjunctural lens in a double sense: to illuminate Zagreb’s municipalist praxis – that is, to understand the balance of forces and challenges and opportunities that activists face when they enter the arena of formal (party) politics, including how these might be navigated to tactical advantage – and, in turn, to shed light on the nature of conjunctural thinking itself as a promising theory and method.

The article is largely the result of fieldwork in Zagreb stretching over one month, October 2022, during which 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipalist activists, think tankers, trade unionists, academics, party members, and city councillors and administrators

– triangulated with participant observation of public meetings and documentary analysis of key materials. Keen to avoid an ‘extractivist’ approach to case study research, the lead author worked closely with a Zagreb-based sociologist (the second author) who was involved with ZjN and, also, had published a number of texts critical of the direction the platform was taking. This allowed for a reflexive research methodology in which positions of insider–outsider were explicitly being reworked and challenged. Through the ‘bending and blending’ of different positionalities (Clarke et al., 2015; Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007), ZjN was approached in a way which understood the importance of both the formal and the informal, and the discursive/symbolic compared to the practical realities of on-the-ground politics. Crucially, earlier drafts of the article were circulated with respondents, a number of whom offered useful corrections of fact and opinion which have been incorporated into this version, making the research a more open-ended and iterative process, more akin to ‘thinking with’ participants and discussing with them the implications of tensions and contradictions between standpoints.

The original aim of the research was to understand how and why alternative economic development discourses were emerging and gaining traction, or not, and with what effect, in city-regions across Europe, including Amsterdam, Bilbao and Zagreb. Described as ‘post-neoliberal’ by members of the research team (Russell et al., 2022) and as ‘anti-neoliberal’ by Zagreb’s municipalists (research interviews, 2022), such alternatives range from degrowth and doughnut economics to community wealth building and the foundational economy. A conjunctural framing, as recently outlined in critical urban studies (Leitner et al., 2019; Leitner and Sheppard, 2020; Peck, 2017), was adopted and developed for teasing out the different dynamics and intersecting tendencies coalescing in Zagreb – and other case study cities – to produce the conditions, often out of crisis, ripe for the development of transformative urban policy agendas. Yet through the fieldwork in Zagreb, it became increasingly apparent that some of the research participants themselves – certain influential ZjN municipalist activists – were doing conjunctural thinking and analysis in more profound ways than could ever possibly be envisaged or practised by an academic approach, for they were translating analysis into action and putting it to work in their political praxis. This article thus attempts to articulate this sense of conjunctural thinking as praxis and its implications for critical geographical research and beyond.

Over the past decade, interest in conjunctural analysis has grown apace across disciplines, especially human geography and urban studies (e.g. Cheng and Gonzalez-Vicente, 2024; Cumbers and Paul, 2022; Davidson and Ward, 2024; Dixon et al., 2023; Featherstone and Karaliotas, 2018; Hart, 2023; Inch and Shepherd, 2020; Leitner and Sheppard, 2020, 2022; Lorne et al., 2024; Peck, 2017, 2024; Sheppard, 2022; Yeung, 2024). This has culminated in attempts to unpack and specify what, exactly, the ‘elusive’ orientation of ‘conjuncturalism’ amounts to as a distinct and operationalisable methodology (Leitner et al., 2019; Peck, 2024; see also Hart, 2023). This, we suggest, is a helpful move for those of us trying to make sense of the enigmatic elasticity of conjunctural analysis as a workable practical toolkit for doing critical geographical research. This methodological manoeuvre appears motivated by efforts to translate conjunctural analysis from a political sensibility into an analytic tool for economic and urban geography – a translation this article seeks to both challenge and advance in a different direction.

While critical urban geography may well be ‘still short of a fully fledged ‘conjunctural turn’” (Davidson and Ward, 2024), conjunctural analysis itself is undergoing what we might call its *urban turn*. The national framing of so much conjunctural thinking to date – that is, beginning with the nation as the problem space from which to launch conjunctural investigations, from Gramsci’s focus on fascism in 1930s Italy to Stuart Hall’s interest in ‘authoritarian populism’ and neoliberalism in reconstructing Britain in the 1970s and 1980s – is usefully challenged, as Clarke (2023) notes, by efforts to ‘globalise’ conjunctural analysis at the international scale (Hart, 2020, 2023) and to ‘urbanise’ it for inter- and intra-urban comparisons (Leitner et al., 2019; Leitner and Sheppard, 2020, 2022; Yeung, 2024). For all that conjuncturalism’s urban turn dispels illusions and clarifies obfuscations – and

inspires the relational-comparative imagination (Hart, 2020; Robinson, 2022) – it also occludes from view important tenets of conjunctural thinking; its core, we contend, is a deeply political orientation towards *praxis* – that is, producing theory for practice oriented towards political transformation. In other words, engaging in an interventionist action-research agenda aimed explicitly at shifting the conjunctural terrain and parameters of the possible, otherwise known as hegemonic struggle. In the following, we distil conjunctural thinking down to what we see as four core concepts – hegemony, crisis, articulation and praxis – and argue that returning to these can help recover conjunctural analysis as an essentially *political* as well as analytic method.

This article builds on Gillian Hart's (2023) important recent intervention on divergent 'modalities' of conjunctural analysis, arguing broadly for a Gramscian modality concerned with hegemonic praxis. It contributes to the task of fleshing out what Cheng and Gonzalez-Vicente (2024), in a recent dialogue with Peck (2024), call a 'conjunctural geography' concerned with 'counter-hegemonic practice' (though Gramsci never explicitly used the term 'counter'-hegemony). It is an attempt to explore the salience for critical geography of a conjunctural approach refocused on praxis, through the concrete example of 'radical municipalism' (Roth et al., 2023). This is exemplified through the case of the municipalist party-platform *Zagreb je Naš!*, which bears all the hallmarks of a conjunctural strategy for transformative socio-spatial change.

In the first part, we review recent efforts at translating conjunctural thinking into an operationalisable methodology for economic geography and urban studies and explore their limitations. We then outline an alternative heuristic for doing conjunctural analysis through four key concepts – hegemony, crisis, articulation and praxis – to suggest how foregrounding these modes might shift the terms of engagement. We then, in the second part, put the four core concepts to work in exploring radical municipalism as an emergent example of hegemonic struggle that illustrates what a conjunctural strategy looks like in practice, highlighting affinities between conjuncturalism and municipalism. In the third part, we mobilise these theoretical and methodological perspectives through a case study of municipalist struggle in Zagreb, blending a conjunctural analysis of the balance of forces, crisis conditions and historical tendencies coming together in Zagreb to set the stage for municipalist action, with a more reflexive and politicised unpacking of the strategic conjunctural thinking practised by ZjN municipalists themselves. Municipalism is therefore analysed both as a product of the current conjuncture – as *conjunctural municipalism* – and as a deeply conjunctural strategy made in response to crisis conditions and opportunities, as *municipalist conjuncturalism*. In the conclusion, we assess what all this might mean for conjunctural thinking as a distinctive form of scholar-activism.

## Part I: Re-politicising conjunctural thinking after the urban turn

Conjunctural thinking has recently been defined as 'an implicit commitment to a particular form of critical enquiry, with origins traceable to historical materialism, cultural studies, and critical realism' (Dixon et al., 2023: 1211). These three different lineages have overlapped and interwoven, clashed and collided, to produce contested interpretations of conjunctural thinking. Inspired by calls to 'look elsewhere' beyond the disciplinary boundaries of economic geography (Lorne et al., 2024), we might follow Dixon et al. (2023) in tracing a *historical materialist* thread originating with Gramsci, and deriving from Marx and Lenin, with a focus on hegemonic struggle and a philosophy of praxis; a *cultural studies* strand stemming from Gramsci and unfurled by Stuart Hall and which has found its way into geography via Doreen Massey and Gillian Hart, among others, most alive to contingency and articulation in its multiple senses; and a *critical realist* line that can be traced back to Althusser (2006 [1977]), as an indirect legacy, with affinity between Althusserian and Bhaskarian interpretations of Marxism as a philosophy of *science*, though not without significant differences (see O'Boyle and McDonough, 2016). Often counterposed to Gramsci, this Althusserian legacy is concerned with the overdetermination of structural tendencies and provides the basis for conjuncturalism's recent

reinterpretation – also via regulation theory – as a method for critical urban studies and geographical political economy.

The ‘profound differences’ between Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis and Althusser’s ‘scientificity’ help explain what Hart (2023: 136) identifies as conjuncturalism’s ‘distinctively different methods [. . .] at play [. . .] underpinned by divergent conceptual framings and with very different political stakes that need to be made clear’. Such diverse and divergent genealogies and epistemologies are responsible for a lively and generative interdisciplinary debate over the nature and purpose of conjunctural thinking which, unsurprisingly, appears notoriously enigmatic and ‘elusive’. With no clearly defined paradigm or methodological rules to follow, it is seen as ‘more of an art than a science’, less a ‘codified method’ than an ‘ethos, commitment, and orientation’ to a particular way of thinking and of approaching a research problem (Dixon et al., 2023: 1209–1211). That research problem is not a traditional social-scientific question, or discovery for its own sake, but a ‘different sensibility from mainstream analysis, either academic or journalistic’ (Grayson and Little, 2017: 66).

Nonetheless, moves to rejuvenate conjunctural analysis as a critical academic methodology have recently been made within economic geography and urban studies. Jamie Peck, Helga Leitner and Eric Sheppard have begun to systematise methodological rules for operationalising what they call ‘conjuncturalism’ as a research methodology (Leitner et al., 2019; Leitner and Sheppard, 2020, 2022; Peck, 2017, 2024; Sheppard, 2022). ‘Atypical cases’, ‘anomalous situations’ and ‘problem spaces’ provide the starting point for identifying case studies for exploring conjunctural terrains from an ‘emancipatory ethico-politico standpoint’ (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020: 495). The method is ‘creative theorizing in place’ (Peck, 2024: 4) – a ‘thick theorisation’ deeply grounded and conditioned by empirical context – to generate useful ‘mid-level’ theories and concepts attentive to the dialectical interdependencies and processes of mediation between the general and the particular, abstract and concrete, macro and micro, epochal periodisation and everyday rhythms, necessity and contingency, with explanatory power for navigating complex social realities (Dixon et al., 2023). Situations are analysed for their theoretically ‘ambiguous’ and disruptive potentialities, while remaining wary of both abstract theorisation for its own sake and unprincipled induction or hyper-empiricism.

If thinking conjuncturally is concerned with ‘seeking to identify what is specific to a given historical moment’ (Grayson and Little, 2017: 63), what we might call its ‘urban turn’ charts a way to spatialise and systematise its historicist sensibility. This works from the *inside/out* (Leitner et al., 2019) of a specific problem space to explore conjunctural connections by spiralling outwards and inwards, ‘venturing out and back’ spatially, ‘looping back and forth’ temporally and scaling up and down – going ‘all the way up’, ‘all the way down’ and ‘all the way out’ (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020; Peck, 2024). Such a ‘three-dimensional socio-spatial ontology’ (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020: 498) is ambitious and exhaustive, expanding and advancing critical urban studies; an approach described by Leitner et al. (2019) as ‘situated’, ‘relational’, ‘contextualised’, ‘multiscalar’, ‘polycentric’, ‘transversal’, ‘iterative’ and ‘reflexive’. It makes for an extremely comprehensive inquiry into the overdetermined conditions that shape *both* the conjunctural trajectories of particular places *and* the relations between and within places, through *inter-*urban and *intra-*urban comparisons (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020, 2022). If ‘conjunctural analysis is extremely ambitious [then] conjunctural comparison is even more so’ (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020: 499). Such ambition, however, risks overburdening the analysis with comprehensive exhaustiveness, and conflating conjunctural thinking with urban political economy and comparative urban studies, potentially collapsing into each other. It remains unclear what a conjunctural perspective – on these terms – really brings to a critical urban geography that is not already there implicitly; it risks amounting to a ‘playful intellectual pirouette’ (Cheng and Gonzalez-Vicente, 2024).

While Peck, Leitner and Sheppard explicitly retain the critical normativity of the Gramscian project, this is rejected wholesale by other translations of conjunctural analysis into urban geography. In a recent intervention, Davidson and Ward (2024) identify two types of ‘conjunctural analysis’ – one



(familiarily) normative and critical, associated with Gramsci and Hall; the other rationalist and empiricist, based not on critical realism but on the ‘relational realism’ of Karl Popper and Charles Tilly – and argue for a move towards the latter, reassembling it as just another relational methodology in critical social science, shorn of its distinctive political purpose. This risks reducing conjunctural analysis to a rather impartial and inert empirical investigation into conjunctures as objective situations analysed impassively through the concepts of ‘plasticity’ (fixity–fluidity), ‘composites’ (assemblage–relations) and ‘temporalities’ (rhythms–time horizons). ‘The charge of conjunctural analysis’, write Davidson and Ward (2024), ‘is to decipher and disaggregate the various individual and aggregate rationalities of this *composite* urban situation and the relations that draw them together and push them apart’ – but without any political impulse, normative vision or strategic intent driving the analysis, this ‘charge’ lacks energy, weight and direction. For conjunctural analysis to retain any distinction as a singular approach to critical geography, or critical inquiry in general, we should strengthen – not eschew – its grounding in the political work of Gramsci and Hall and their translators for the present.

Davidson and Ward’s (2024) reinterpretation deliberately *depoliticises* conjunctural thinking, disavowing its central focus on praxis and the drive for social and political transformation. So-called ‘conjunctural urban geographies’ are constructed as a derivative composite of existing relational methodologies rather than as something qualitatively distinct. Through this reconstruction, core ideas at the heart of conjunctural approaches – the struggle for hegemony through articulation and praxis – get lost in translation. This urban-geographical turn is so concerned with generating revisable theory-claims for deciphering empirical reality on rationalist grounds through an exhaustively ‘multi-dimensional’ analysis (see Yeung, 2024) that it gets distracted from the very *raison d’être* of conjunctural thinking. By positioning conjunctural thinking behind such a wide-angle, objectivity-seeking analytic lens, we lose focus of its essentially *critical*-theoretical perspective and political purpose.

What distinguishes conjunctural analysis from other critical geographies and methodologies, we argue, is its praxis orientation to geography and history – foregrounding the multiple temporalities and historical forces that condense spatially in the present to shape the future of any place-based struggle; and understanding the unfolding, and active reworking, of history through the translational work of articulation. Conjunctural analysis is about (re)articulating the balance of forces for subaltern struggles for hegemony; about generating public-facing knowledge for political praxis, aiming to ultimately, in Gramscian terms, break down the divisions between manual and intellectual labour – a pedagogic sensibility that would struggle to fit within the technical coordinates of multi-dimensional social-scientific situational analysis.

This article is therefore an attempt to recover – and define more precisely – some of conjunctural thinking’s political purpose. In this way, we follow the spirit of Peck, Leitner and Sheppard’s endeavours to illuminate the *method* of conjunctural thinking and provide some methodological rules of thumb. This is our attempt at distilling the kernel of conjunctural thinking as, following Hart (2023: 136), ‘not simply a “method” that can be divorced from theory and politics’ but something embedded from the outset in grounded struggles with ‘political stakes’. We outline what is at stake, politically, through four core ideas defining conjunctural thinking: hegemony, crisis, articulation and praxis.

Taking inspiration from Peter D Thomas’ (2023: 6) Gramscian investigation of the four Aristotelian ‘causes’ (*aitia*) of contemporary radical politics – ‘the modes of explaining its constitution’ – these four concepts may be understood as broadly corresponding to ‘final cause’ (goal), ‘material cause’ (nature), ‘efficient cause’ (method) and ‘formal cause’ (organisational form). In what follows, we explain the four ‘causes’ of conjunctural thinking as hegemony (the strategic goal or purpose), crisis (the material conditions constituting conjunctures), articulation (the method of doing conjunctural

analysis) and praxis (the practical shape it takes in, against and beyond both the academy and the ‘party form’, the dominant form of political organisation within liberal-bourgeois capitalist polities).

### *Final cause: Hegemony*

Hegemony is commonly understood as sovereignty, leadership or domination of society through consent and coercion on the terrain of the ‘integral state’. As Gramsci (1971: 57–58) suggests:

A social group dominates antagonistic groups [. . .and] leads kindred and allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise ‘leadership’ before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to ‘lead’ as well.

Gramsci’s (1971) expansive conception of the ‘integral state’ sees it as an arena of social relations dialectically encompassing both ‘political society’ – organisational spaces dominated by the governing classes with a monopoly on coercion – and ‘civil society’ – those associational spaces through which consent is largely mediated and contested (see Davies, 2021). However, hegemony is also understood as the ‘strategic method’ for transforming relations of domination from below through subaltern leadership (Thomas, 2023), as something more akin to what is often called ‘counter’-hegemony.

Hegemonic domination is, for Gramsci (1971: 399–400), composed by ‘organic’ features that are ‘relatively permanent’ and structural (such as social class relations) while ‘conjunctural’ features ‘appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental’. He is often cited as proclaiming that ‘it is upon this [conjunctural] terrain that the forces of opposition organise’ to potentially unsettle hegemonic settlements in moments of crisis (Gramsci, 1971: 178; quoted in the works of Leitner and Sheppard, 2020 and Cumbers and Paul, 2022). For Gramsci, a conjuncture – or ‘situation’ – comprised three moments, ‘levels’ or ‘relations of force’ (Gramsci, 1971: 175), what Bob Jessop describes as the ‘economic-corporate, political, and politico-military’ moments (Jessop and Morgan, 2022: 95). First, the relation of ‘social forces’ is relatively ‘closely linked to structure, objective, independent of human will’, composed of the class relations of material production; second, the relation of ‘political forces’ is assembled according to ‘the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness and organisation attained by the various social classes’ and, third, the relation of ‘military forces’ which ‘from time to time is directly decisive’; in other words, ‘Historical development oscillates continually between the first and the third moment with the mediation of the second’ (Gramsci, 1971: 180–183). Proletarian and subaltern classes must organise themselves as coherent ‘political forces’ capable of waging ‘wars of position’ through civil society, as well as, periodically, ‘wars of manoeuvre’ to take control of the political institutions of the integral state.

For Gramsci ‘wars of position’ and ‘manoeuvre’ were metaphors, borrowed from military strategy, with the caveat that, in political struggles, there is never a moment of defeat of the enemy (Gramsci, 1971: 229). The appropriateness of one or the other and, indeed, their potential fusion is, for Gramsci, a matter of conjunctural expediency. As he writes, distancing himself somewhat from both Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg:

In politics [. . .] the war of manoeuvre subsists so long as it is a question of winning positions which are not decisive, so that all the resources of the State’s hegemony cannot be mobilised. But when, for one reason or another, these positions have lost their value and only the decisive positions are at stake, then one passes over to siege warfare; this is concentrated, difficult, and requires exceptional qualities of patience and inventiveness. (Gramsci, 1971: 239)

Gramsci’s *problematique* was to understand what the ‘passive revolutions’ that secured bourgeois hegemony from above – liberalism in 19th-century Europe, fascism in the 20th century – could teach

us about achieving proletarian hegemony through active revolutions from below. The regulationalist and critical realist approaches that underpin the translation of conjunctural thinking into geographical political economy are concerned with tracing passive revolutionary hegemonic transitions between ‘regimes of accumulation’ and ‘modes of regulation’, from postwar Fordist-Keynesianism to post-Fordist neoliberalism (see Jessop and Morgan, 2022). Like most contemporary critical social science, therefore, these perspectives interpret hegemony as either the ‘intersubjective foundations of domination’ or a ‘modern theory of sovereignty’ (Thomas, 2023: 12–14).

However, Thomas’ (2023: 12–14) reappraisal of Gramsci’s underappreciated original notion of hegemony as a ‘distinctive strategic method for the autonomization of self-emancipatory politics’ implores us to think conjuncturally like a ‘strategic methodologist’, as Thomas characterises Gramsci. This means furnishing – if not replacing – our understanding of hegemony as a *systems-theoretical periodisation* of domination or sovereignty with a *methodological–strategic process* of ‘de-subalternization’ (Thomas, 2023: 12). On this reading, hegemony is a self-emancipatory political praxis for perceiving and advancing the emergent. While regulationalist and critical realist approaches place the emphasis on understanding the relationship between what Raymond Williams called the ‘dominant’ (hegemonic formations) and the ‘residual’ (persistence of questions unanswered by the dominant), a praxis-oriented reading of hegemony invites us to explore relations with the ‘emergent’ (see Clarke, 2023: 5–6).

### Material cause: Crisis

If hegemony is the *final cause* of conjunctural analysis, then crisis represents its *material cause*, the conditions both provoking and demanding analyses. Crisis animates the kind of hegemonic disruption and contestation that conjunctural thinking attends to. Conjunctural opportunities emerge especially in the interval between two periods of relatively stable hegemonic rule – what Gramsci characteristically analogised with the problematically monarchical (and at other times masculinist) metaphor as the ‘interregnum’ between two ‘reigns’ (Clarke, 2023: 186). Moments in which multiple crises compound may register a wider ‘crisis of legitimacy’ or ‘authority’ in which the ‘ruling class has lost its consensus’ and is ‘no longer “leading” but only “dominant”, exercising coercive force alone’; as captured in the classic, if overused, Gramsci passage: ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’ (Gramsci, 1971: 275–276).

In such an ‘interregnum’ – such as the period since 2008 when neoliberalism has become zombie-like, undead and still stumbling – irresolvable crises accumulate and condense under pressure, precipitating heightened opportunities for contesting delegitimised leadership and intervening in history, as ‘turning points in the systemic organisation of power and production’ (Moore, 2015: 27). However, such a simplistic dualism of relatively discrete and stable epochs punctuated by ruptural breaks – a temporal imaginary advanced by regulation theory – fails to capture the fluid indeterminacy and interweaving of diverse temporalities entangled in any *attempted* stabilisation or settlement, always riven by antagonisms and contradictions productive of dynamic disequilibrium; a dualist image thus best understood as a simplified metaphor for translating history (more on which below).

As temporary states of emergency that threaten normality (Knight and Stewart, 2016), crises invoke disorder, danger, risk and loss of control (Clarke, 2023). Yet crises not only provoke reactions to seemingly uncontrollable events; they also open the space – and time – for proactive agency, to judge a moment in its historical context and decide a course of action; the ancient Greek root *krisis* originally meant ‘judgement’ (Knight and Stewart, 2016). Indeed, crisis and critique possess the same Greek root (Roitman, 2013), as do crisis and opportunity in Chinese languages. Crises are thus provocative of decision moments – decisive and momentous inflection points at which historical agents can make change.



As disruptive events that interrupt the flow of things, crises reveal how the world could be otherwise; they ‘expose the seams of temporality to view’ and bring historical events to bear on present possibilities, time made elastic under stress (Knight and Stewart, 2016: 3). For instance, new municipalist struggles reverberate with the imaginary of the 1871 Paris Commune and, in the case of Zagreb, the postwar experience of Yugoslav socialist self-management and councilism (Kirn, 2019). Just like history itself, crises are ‘made up’ – ‘imagined and projected as matters of social concern’, amplified and ‘assembled as objects of political action’ (Clarke, 2023: 126) – and ‘made to speak’ for specific political projects, exploited as strategic opportunities to advance ideological agendas, left or right. Conjunctural analysis not only observes crises as external phenomena but also actively *participates* in the construction of crises as objects of political interest and opportunity.

Crises are thus critical to understanding conjunctural analysis (Clarke, 2010). Crises mark reflexive moments in history in which radical structural change is fleetingly conceivable if not always graspable. When multiple crisis conditions intersect and compound, they produce con-junctures – the combining of multiple junctures between different temporalities, systemic scales, and structural and contingent conditions. The Latin root of conjuncture, ‘*coniugere*’, Peck (2024) imparts, means to bind, join, combine, inflect – putting the inflection on the junctures, knots, joints and seams *between* periods, on ‘perverse confluences’ (Dagnino, 2007). Con-junctures are thus animated and slippery objects of analysis that only present their temporal form from the perspective of the particular war of position being waged; they may signify a passing moment of crisis within a mode of regulation or, indeed, capture an entire historical period, such as neoliberalism, as Clarke (2023: 123) suggests with such remarks as ‘the start of this conjuncture (in 1979)’ implying an extremely elastic concept stretching over many decades (see also Cumbers and Paul, 2022).

Such temporal elasticity reflects Hart’s (2020: 235) positing of the conjuncture as ‘not just [. . .] a period of time, but an accumulation of contradictions’ or, indeed, Hall’s later rendering, in his fruitful collaborations with Massey – the inspiration behind much *geographical* conjunctural thinking (see Lorne et al., 2024) notwithstanding Hart’s contributions – ‘as a way of marking significant transitions between different political moments [understood] as a general system of analysis to any historical situation’ (Hall and Massey, 2010: 58; cited in Cumbers and Paul, 2022: 204). Conjunctural thinking is thus above all a *sensibility* to studying diverse historical (and geographical) situations constructed out of multiple temporalities and united only by a mutual expectancy of political tension and opportunity. Conjunctural analysis can thus focus its lens on a variety of ‘problem spaces’, at various spatial and temporal scales, chosen for revealing convergence points, nodes or knots in conjunctural entanglements (Peck, 2024).

### *Efficient cause: Articulation*

Articulation is the *method* through which such conjunctural entanglements can be analytically (and politically) disentangled. If conjuncture speaks to the ‘condensation’ of multiple temporalities, rhythms, imaginaries, forces, tendencies, relations and antagonisms coalescing under pressure – and articulating together – to produce contradictory social formations (Clarke, 2023), then the challenge for conjunctural analysis is to disentangle all these various threads and rearticulate them for praxis. This is a task made all the more challenging by the radically different durations and scales at play: from intense events to the ‘longest of the *longue durées*’ (Hart, 2023: 157) evoked by such concepts as the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, in sweeping ‘world-ecological’ analyses (Moore, 2015).

Con-junctures are thus ‘overdetermined’ by multiple, overlapping, interweaving and complexly interdependent determinate conditions. The Althusserian idea of overdetermination, as Leitner and Sheppard (2020: 493) neatly characterise it, holds that all ‘elements constituting any particular set of events – primary and secondary contradictions – are each determined by all the others’. Yet for Althusser (2006 [1977]), overdetermination comes with a caveat: of the ‘levels’ that constitute any

social formation, the economic possesses the greatest causal power, for a ‘structure in dominance’; the economic is ‘determinant in the last instance’, Althusser (2006 [1977]: 113) famously remarked, but ‘the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes’. This highlights the subtle relationship between structure and agency in conjunctural thinking, alert to the always open interplay between determinations and contingencies, and alive to emergence and possibility in any social formation.

If the connections between the different social relations constituting society – relations *articulated* together to produce social formations, such as race and class in racial capitalism – are always in complex, shifting conjunctural interrelation in need of continual reproduction, they are thus ‘capable of breaks, discontinuities, contradictions, interruptions’ (Hall, quoted in the work of Hart, 2023: 144); and this opens possibilities for their ‘disarticulation’ and ‘rearticulation’ (Clarke, 2023). ‘The only Marx worth celebrating then’, Hall (1983: 43) famously remarked, ‘is the Marx which is interested in thinking and in struggling on an open terrain, the Marx who offers a marxism without guarantees, a marxism without answers’. Indeed, Hall considered theory as akin to ‘wrestling with the angels’, adding that ‘the only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency’ (Hall, 1992: 280).

So where does this leave the task of conjunctural analysis? Lenin’s remarks that the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution ‘resulted from a coming together of an extremely unique historical situation’ in which ‘absolutely heterogenous class interests, absolutely contrary political and social strivings have merged [. . .] in a strikingly “harmonious” manner’ inspired Gramsci to develop an historical-materialist approach to explaining – *articulating* – how seemingly contradictory social forces combine together – *articulate* – to create historical change (Lenin, quoted in the work of Grayson and Little, 2017: 61–62). Here, articulation is rendered double: ‘linking together’ (constructing/connecting/assembling) and ‘giving expression to’ (voicing/representing/explaining). This twofold sense of articulation conveys both the idea of bringing interests to voice – sometimes through a ‘vernacular ventriloquism’, speaking on behalf of ‘ordinary people’ to capture ‘common sense’ (Clarke, 2023: 57) – and of constructing connections between divergent class interests to articulate a common project. The latter is the difficult political-cultural task of building a Gramscian ‘historic bloc’ – a temporary, unstable ‘unity in difference’ (Clarke, 2023: 98). Gramsci understood ‘common sense’ as the ‘folklore of philosophy’; a plural noun, composed of ‘fragments’ and ‘traces’, rather than a singular entity (see Clarke, 2023: 93), as the ‘uncritical and largely unconscious’ (Gramsci, 1971: 435) structuring of social reality through everyday beliefs, mythologies and ideologies. What he called ‘good sense’, by contrast, is the ‘healthy nucleus that exists in “common sense” that “deserves to be made more unitary and coherent’ (Gramsci, 1971: 328) as the basis for popular critical thinking and revolutionary collective consciousness. We might see conjunctural analysis as an attempt to articulate common sense and to *translate* the good sense emergent within it for praxis.

Translation, then, is central to articulation as method. Drawing on a rich body of Gramscian geographical scholarship on translation (Kipfer and Hart, 2013; Kipfer and Mallick, 2022; see also Clarke et al., 2015; Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007), we can understand translation in numerous related senses: the act of literally translating historical texts, such as Gramsci’s writings, for use in contemporary situations; broader translation of texts – and contexts – across languages, registers and historical periods; translational acts of transforming theory into action and vice versa; ‘translation is fundamentally about transforming the common sense of particular social groups’ (Kipfer and Hart, 2013: 329). Kipfer and Hart (2013: 327) cite scholarship that indicates how ‘translation’ shares its Latin root with tradition/transmission and traitor/betrayal; to translate is to not only transmit but also to transform a (con)text in ways traitorous to the original. This is the kernel of conjunctural thinking as a method for praxis – to mine the struggles of past times and other places for insights into how to negotiate the balance of forces here in the present, without misplaced fidelity to the source. Kipfer and Mallick (2022: 145–146) suggest ‘the travelling-transposition of theory as *politically constructed* [. . .] in turn transforms the ‘original’ theory concept in a ‘retrospective reconfiguration’’. This gets at conjunctural

thinking's historicist sensibility as a generator of urgent, active, revisable theories that intervene in the (re)making of history through translation, transmission and transformation of knowledge, always in motion and under reconstruction, for political use in concrete situations.

### Formal cause: Praxis

Such translational work is shaped by the *form* of conjunctural thinking – that is, praxis. The vital question, for the construction of proletarian hegemony, of ‘the emergence of new forms of mass intellectuality, a transformed common sense, and new strata of intellectuals’ was, for Gramsci, answered by the reimagining of the party form as the Modern Prince (Sotiris, 2013; see also Thomas, 2009). Reinventing Machiavelli's Prince, Gramsci's Modern Prince advanced a ‘vigorous antithesis’ to passive revolution (Thomas, cited in Hart, 2023: 150) and ‘a way to think the political operation of the revolutionary party’ (Sotiris, 2023: 20). This is ‘a conception of the party not as a hierarchical organisational structure, but rather an open political and intellectual *process* focused on experimentation and learning, constantly adapting itself to the surrounding social environment and the dynamics of the conjuncture’ (Hart, 2023: 16). Importantly, Gramsci's philosophy of praxis conceived of bourgeois hegemony as upheld through the separation of intellectuals from the masses; proletarian hegemony necessarily entailing the unity of manual and intellectual labour – a unity precluded by Althusser's philosophy of science (see Hart, 2023; Thomas, 2009). The Modern Prince breaks down the divisions between manual and intellectual labour for popular political education, transforming the role of the intellectual from a relatively passive observer, diagnostician and critical commentator into a more active and militant participant in praxis.

Central to the Modern Prince and mass intellectuality is Gramsci's notion of ‘prevision’, the method through which conjunctural analysis makes its contribution to the task of shifting the conjunctural terrain (Thomas, 2009; see also Hart, 2023). Thomas (2017: 295) describes ‘*pre-vision*’ (*previsione*) as ‘that which comes *before* vision, as its condition of possibility, or as that which allows the present to be seen *differently*’. Hart (2023: 151) sees affinities with Lefebvre's (1991: 66) ‘regressive-progressive method’ – ‘starting in the present, working our way back to the past, and then retracing our steps’ to understand ‘the genesis of the present’. In other words, prevision is to vision what articulation is to voice. However, prevision – and ‘the notion of a contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous’ in general – is not unique to conjunctural thinking, but a feature of much critical theory, such as Bloch's work (Thomas, 2017: 282).

We might also identify affinities with Lefebvre's (1995: 141) notion of ‘transduction’ as ‘an incessant feedback between conceptual framework used’ and ‘empirical observations’ to construct ‘virtual objects’ – inchoate socio-spatial imaginaries towards which we can orient our action – in an epistemological movement that Purcell (2013: 23–24) describes as an ‘extrapolation or amplification in thought of practices and ideas that are already taking place in the city’. Gramsci – much like Lefebvre (see Kipfer, 2008) – emphasised critical theory's power to see the present differently, to take conditions not simply as given but as actively constructed and to make possible strategic interventions that could potentially transform those conditions (Hart, 2023; Thomas, 2017). This is prefiguration in praxis (theory applied to practice). Conjunctural analysis thus has an important role to play in hegemonic struggle: advancing new articulations of contradictory social reality that are capable of disentangling and then rearticulating socio-spatial relations which at first appear tightly bound together in necessary or inevitable chains of domination.

## Part 2: The municipalist turn

In the preceding sections, we sketched out a heuristic for conjunctural thinking based on its four ‘causes’ – understood capaciously as purpose, nature, method and form, as well as origin and explanation. In this

section, we mobilise this reading to interpret the urban social movements collectively known as ‘new municipalism’ as a set of distinctively conjunctural approaches to radical politics – both in historical conception, born of crisis conditions (conjunctural municipalism) and strategic sensibility (municipalist conjuncturalism). These two strategies – municipalism and conjuncturalism – share a political orientation to the present, both seeking to unsettle historical – and urban – settlements and, as Leitner and Sheppard (2020: 495) characterise conjuncturalism, ‘to intervene in order to achieve progressive ends during moments of conjunctural uncertainty, when hegemony is in question’. For all its limitations, the urban turn profoundly advances conjunctural thinking, not least in pointing us towards a space and scale of action – the urban – that appears especially generative of conjunctural praxis. How so?

### *Hegemony and the urban*

First, municipalists engage in hegemonic struggle through *dual power* – aiming to take control of existing state institutions through electoral wars of manoeuvre as well as build a counterpower to the state and capital by reinventing the form of the commune and experimenting with democratic urban institutions from worker-owned co-ops to neighbourhood assemblies (Thompson and Nishat-Botero, 2023). This is deeply influenced by radical thinking on the commons and social ecology. Municipalism aims to ‘prefigure’ a radically democratic local state (Cooper, 2017) as a ‘strategic front’ in a multi-scalar hegemonic strategy to transform colonial capitalism and the nation-state (Russell, 2019). It originated in an *apuesta* – the speculative bet or wager made by the *Observatorio Metropolitano* in Madrid and adopted by Spanish municipalists – ‘that the best way to begin precipitating system-wide shifts is through towns and cities’ (Roth et al., 2023: 2015). Municipalism thus takes the municipal or ‘urban’ scale as its ‘strategic entry point for developing broader practices and theories of transformative social change’ (Russell, 2019: 991).

Just as cities are the strategic entry points for municipalist praxis, so too are cities the ‘points of analytic entry’ for conjunctural urbanism (Leitner et al., 2019: 40). Conjunctural analysis addresses the ‘joints of a social problem’ (Bertell Ollman, quoted in the work of Leitner et al., 2019: 40), seeing cities and urban sites as ‘hinges’ in systems, ‘knots’ in networks, as ‘articulations’ of forces, where crises coalesce as political opportunities. Departing from Althusser’s ‘levels’ of social reality (political, economic, ideological), Lefebvre (1991) conceived of ‘the urban’ as an open totality, a field of relations (M) mediating between the private world of everyday life (P) and the global scale (G) of state power and capital flows (see Goonewardena, 2005, 2018; Robinson, 2022). The urban is not so much associated with topographical forms of urbanisation – from the traditional polis to extended forms of planetary urbanisation (Goonewardena, 2018) – as with a specific mode of *mediation* or mediating terrain of social relations structured by the forces or ‘formants’ of centrality and difference, assemblage and juxtaposition or simultaneity (see Robinson, 2022: 263). The urban is thus the site of conjunctural articulation of diverse determinations and relations, condensed spatially and productive of emergence, possibility and excess (see also Thompson and Nishat-Botero, 2023).

The affinities between Lefebvre’s theory of the urban and Gramscian conjunctural thinking have been richly documented (see Kipfer, 2008). Lefebvre sought, claimed Ed Soja, to ‘spatialise the conjuncture’ (quoted in the work of Leitner and Sheppard, 2020: 494), or to ‘urbanise Gramsci’ (Kipfer, 2008). Hart, too, in her distillation of a ‘global’ conjunctural thinking, picks up on Lefebvre’s dialectical ‘levels’ to help conceptualise the interconnections between ‘global conjunctures’ at level G, ‘praxis in the multiple arenas of everyday life’ at level P, and ‘projects, practices and processes of bourgeois hegemony’ mediating the other two at level M (Hart, 2023: 151). Here, the urban is aligned with material-ideological processes of hegemonic mediation. Intervening in urban life, therefore, becomes a way to ‘hack’ bourgeois hegemony, perhaps, just as municipalism aims to hack the institutions of the local state (see Russell, 2019). Digital hacker thinking is a strong current in parts of *Zagreb je Naš!*, who are influenced by the work of McKenzie Wark and her *A Hacker Manifesto*,

among others (not least Lefebvre). Municipalism can thus be seen as a strategic tool – however, blunt, fragile and crisis-ridden (see Roth et al., 2023) – for hacking the urban form as well as the state form of capitalism (Thompson and Nishat-Botero, 2023).

### Urban crises

Second, crisis, the material cause. New municipalism is the product and symptom of a particular conjuncture, or interregnum, marked by crisis (Paul and Cumbers, 2023). Since the 2008 financial crisis, the emergence of a ‘new state capitalism’ ‘signals a significant geohistorical moment (maybe not a new “era” as such, but a notable inflection point for sure)’ (Peck, 2023: 761), whose progressive analogue, at the local level, is municipalisation and, perhaps, municipalism. Cumbers and Paul (2022) describe the current moment as the ‘remunicipalisation conjuncture’ in which the local state has ‘returned’ with renewed power and ambition to manage local economies and municipal affairs, with (re)municipalisation of public services and economic functions gathering pace across localities around the world. Radical municipalism sits at the furthest end of this spectrum spanning the conjunctural turn to the state; it exploits the crisis of austerity urbanism and of the local state, to prefigure a different kind of state (Cooper, 2017).

That conjunctural crises – from debt and housing crises to the crisis of care – appear to condense and crystallise, manifest and intensify and become most tangible in urban settlements is one cause of municipalist struggle (Davies, 2021). New municipalism originated in Spain as a response to the housing foreclosure crisis precipitated by global financial crisis – fuelled by opposition to enclosures of the urban commons, accumulation-by-dispossession, gentrification, touristification, austerity urbanism and the speculative financialisation of urban everyday life (Thompson, 2021). Nowhere has crisis been felt so acutely than in social reproduction. Municipalists attempt to heal patriarchal-capitalist rifts in this domain through centring care and relations of mutual aid within urban interventions, for a ‘caring city’ (see Roth et al., 2023). Similarly, for the crisis of political legitimacy and representation, municipalists attempt to ‘feminise politics’ by challenging the ‘masculinist grammars’ of personality-driven leadership and expert-driven technocracy, and by instilling values of empathy, listening, compromise, negotiation and delegation within practices of direct democracy (Sarnow and Tiedemann, 2023). There is another sense in which municipalism is a response to crisis – a crisis in social movement strategy and tactics. *Conjunctural municipalism* was the product of strategic rethinking among Spanish activists that ‘occupying the squares’ was not achieving their goals and that a new strategy of ‘occupying the institutions’ was required. This influenced an early mantra of ZjN – ‘one foot in the institutions; one foot in the streets’.

### Municipalist articulation

Third, municipalist method starts from the ‘politics of proximity’ (Russell, 2019) found in municipalities as the basis for political organising across difference and building new democratic institutions beyond capital and the state. This method aims at *politicising* proximity and urban encounter, ‘focused on both *intensifying* our proximity to other people, places, and ecologies, and on a *becoming-social* of these proximities’ (Roth et al., 2023: 2015). This might seek to build new solidarities between different classes by virtue of their shared material interests in, and potential democratic planning of, ‘foundational’ services and material infrastructures (Russell et al., 2022) especially in the realm of the ‘urban everyday’ (Beveridge and Koch, 2021). Thus, municipalists attempt to articulate a new historic bloc cutting across traditional class cleavages by mobilising shared interests in everyday urban infrastructure and spaces – a distinctly *municipalist conjuncturalism*. They also mobilise a form of Gramscian ‘prevision’ – representing the present differently to enable the realisation of a different



future – to articulate a vision of urban democracy, and by seeing the state and capitalism as mediated through the urban and therefore potentially transformable through urban interventions.

However, municipalist capabilities to articulate a new common sense are drastically constrained by its class politics. The class composition of municipalist activists is heavily weighted towards highly educated and precarious professionals, if not managers; their ranks drawn disproportionately from the arts, media, public administration, universities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions and think tanks. This gives them great conjunctural leverage on the terrain of the integral state. But it also speaks to their contradictory class position, torn between capital and labour, with material interests in the reproduction of expertise and the continued division between manual and intellectual labour – a counterpoint to mass intellectuality. Indeed, a gaping divide exists within many municipalist movements, between expert-activists and the subaltern and proletarian groups whose political support and participation they seek (see Béal et al., 2023). Municipalism’s potential to bridge such divides and articulate an historic bloc is contained within the organisational forms through which it propagates itself and pushes against – the political party and the NGO.

### *Municipalist praxis*

Finally, organisational form. If the cell form of capitalism is the commodity, the cell-form of municipalism is the assembly – or ‘plenum’ in the post-Yugoslav space (Riding, 2018) – posited as a distinct, novel form of progressive political organisation in addition to those traditionally studied by political science: the political party, the trade union and the social movement (Shelley, 2024; see also Roth et al., 2023). Just as party members *influence* politics through national political parties; just as organised workers *voice* their economic interests through trade unions; and just as activists *initiate* social change through movements: so do what Shelley (2024) calls ‘democratic municipalist agents’ seek to *control* municipal affairs, by acting through democratic associations, centred on neighbourhood and city assemblies. The radical municipalist assembly and non-party political platform resemble Gramsci’s Modern Prince. Municipalists eschew the hierarchical decision-making of elected representatives for a directly democratic system of delegation and recallable mandates that invests leadership – and strategy and tactics – in movement delegates. Mass intellectuality is embodied in the municipalist innovation of ‘collaborative theory building’ (see Russell, 2019: 991). If looking for a contemporary example of ‘a laboratory of mass critical intellectuality and experimentation’ that is the Modern Prince (Hart, 2023: 150) look no further than radical municipalism.

A serious omission in studies of municipalism is the form through which it organises its members and formalises its activities. For instance, Shelley’s (2024) fascinating argument about ‘democratic municipalist agents’ constituting a novel category of progressive political changemaker – alongside the party, union and movement – fails to specify how, exactly, such an agent constitutes itself. Municipalists reject the traditional party form for a non-party political platform model capable of cutting across party lines and incorporating diverse coalitions of multiple parties and trade unions, as well as unorganised publics. But to do this, municipalist agents have harnessed NGOs as think tanks for strategic ideas, training grounds for members, vehicles for activities and sources of funding – especially in the post-Yugoslav space of Zagreb (Stubbs, 2012, 2019). While municipalism, as practised in Zagreb and elsewhere, attempts to make a break with the NGO form for something more fluid and movement-based, it can nonetheless be read as an unusually progressive symptomatic expression of the NGOisation and projectification of society that arguably defines the current conjuncture.

Why does this matter for municipalism’s power to intervene conjuncturally? Despite historical origins in grassroots initiatives, the NGO is a form that has become bound up with developmentalist and (neo)liberal ideologies of post-political, technocratic ‘good governance’, whose function is to pursue *projects* with a social mission, measured by performance metrics and managed by experts (Stubbs, 2012). NGOs are run by a particular social class caught between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat – an emergent professional-managerial ‘projectariat’ class (Stubbs, 2019). The projectariat

are constrained by the contradictions of ‘projectification’ inscribed into their dependence on winning funding for projects and the compulsion to deliver project objectives to their funders through project management repertoires. The projectified technocracy implicit in the NGO form contradicts the radical democracy explicated by municipalists. Such contradictions are explored through a case study of the municipalist party-platform ZjN.

### Part 3: The struggle for Zagreb

*Zagreb je Naš!* is well documented in the burgeoning literature as an exemplary radical municipalist platform (Milan, 2023; Roth et al., 2023; Sarnow and Tiedemann, 2023), paradigmatically ‘platform’ in orientation, though arguably veering towards a more ‘managed’ municipalism (Thompson, 2021). However, municipalist praxis in Zagreb is distinctive, shaped by the specific historical–geographical conjuncture to which it owes its genesis and now struggles to transform – a conjuncture marked notably by the brutal process of economic restructuring in the post-socialist ‘transition’ to a neoliberalised and privatised crony capitalism; the distinctive legacy of Yugoslav socialist self-management and post-Yugoslav NGOisation of civil society; antagonistic local–central state relations and rising reactionary ethno-nationalist forces dominating a hostile national media, judiciary and state government controlled by the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ); Croatia’s integration into the EU and, in 2023, the Eurozone, as Europe’s semi-periphery; as well as growing inter-urban learning and collaboration with other eco-socialist movements across the Balkans and beyond. These conjunctural conditions set the terms of engagement for Zagreb’s municipalist politics, whose four ‘causes’ – final, material, efficient and formal – are analysed in turn below.

#### *Final cause: Hegemonic struggle and (dual) power*

ZjN emerged out of popular struggles against corruption, privatisation and accumulation-by-dispossession, cohering around occupations of streets, squares and derelict buildings against their speculative redevelopment, motivated by radical discourses for the Right to the City and, later, degrowth, and prefiguring an urban commons based on deliberative democracy and shared everyday essential services. As this movement organised itself through NGOs – whose formation we explore below as the formal cause – it developed a municipalist strategy of dual power: aiming to support the eco-socialist agenda of the occupations and assemblies, and to reinvent the lost Yugoslav traditions of self-management, by taking hold of corrupted local state apparatuses and then working to ‘commonise the state’ (Porche and Jeanmougin, 2019).

Thus, ‘Zagreb is Ours!’ was formed as a coalition between various movements and parties to contest the Zagreb city elections of May 2017 drawing together a core group of some hundred diverse activists committed to a broad left-green politics ranging from left liberalism championing minority rights to an anti-capitalist eco-socialism. They originally organised as (and called themselves) a ‘platform’ – in deliberately municipalist terms, to distance themselves from traditional political parties – but later had to register as a party to satisfy Croatian electoral law; the only alternative would have been to contest the elections as a group of citizens associated with a single named person – equally, if not more, antithetical to ZjN’s symbolic intent.

Initially centred on Zagreb through ZjN, the movement developed a conjunctural strategy of hegemonic manoeuvre in which the national state was centrally positioned as an important arena for transforming common sense and supporting counterpowers at the local level. This conjunctural strategy has culminated in the founding in 2019 of *Možemo!* (We Can!), the national party offspring of ZjN – and its partner until the two parties merge as a unified electoral force at the national scale. This is the municipalist *apuesta* in action (Roth et al., 2023) – the municipal scale as a strategic entry point into multi-scalar counter-hegemonic struggle oriented towards the nation-state, even as it risks the premature marginalisation of both radical municipalism and a strong grassroots base.

Since taking office in 2021, ZjN's hegemonic strategy has been weighted towards the state policy side of the duality of dual power, neglecting counterpower almost entirely. At the 2022 Green Academy – a biannual summer school for municipalist activists, which we explain as a formal cause below – Deputy Mayor Danijela Dolenec gave the keynote address, reflecting on the opportunities and challenges facing ZjN in government and expressing ZjN's implicitly conjunctural thinking while also starkly revealing its limits and contradictions. She points to three policy areas that have been prioritised by the ZjN leadership as their 'laundry list'.

First, ZjN aims to rationalise Zagreb Holding Ltd, the City's arms-length agency set up by former mayor Milan Bandić in 2007 to outsource public services and enable a patronage-based system for buying votes and laundering money. Zagreb Holding consists of 15 formerly city-owned enterprises, plus 8 additional companies – responsible for all foundational infrastructure and services provision – and, by 2017, employed over 11,000 people, Croatia's second largest corporation (Hoffmann et al., 2017: 54). Set up so that the mayor effectively 'singlehandedly decides on the use of Holding's budget', Holding served as Bandić's feudal fiefdom for buying consent through providing jobs and rewarding loyalty through promotions (Hoffmann et al., 2017: 54). ZjN's first task was to cut back on overstuffed cronyist administrative and managerial positions and increase its understaffed operative capacity. The task of restructuring Holding arguably remains ZjN's biggest priority and stumbling block for, as Dolenec imparted in her keynote, 'it's important to bring in other constituencies, democratise the company and so on. But first, it needs to be operative. It needs to be able to deliver, otherwise there's no Green Left programme'. This represents a conjunctural understanding of the need to first normalise and then radicalise.

Second, ZjN aimed to municipalise two key foundational infrastructures. The first involved revoking Bandić's controversial and expensive 'parent-educator' policy – a cash-for-care financial aid programme for stay-at-home parents of three or more children supported by radical-conservative Catholic organisations – to fund instead universal provision of childcare and early-education facilities, with some 20 new kindergartens to be built. Despite a number of legal challenges, the 'parent-educator' policy is being phased out and the money diverted to investment in pre-school facilities. The second sought to clean up – in multiple senses – the outsourced waste management system captured by criminal networks through Bandić's clientist regime. Waste management has been municipalised and new infrastructures for sorting waste and expanding recycling have been matched by policies for collectivising investments and fines at the apartment building scale, beyond the individual household, thereby potentially renewing (some) Yugoslav traditions in communal cooperation. And in response to two injurious landslides threatening closure of the notorious Jakuševac landfill in late 2023, ZjN accelerated construction of a new waste management plant.

The rationale for these flagship interventions in waste and childcare is their almost-universal influence on everyday life – providing a basis for renewing urban citizenship and rebuilding a neo-Yugoslav collectivist ethos and socialist solidarity all but destroyed by conflict and capitalism. However, the recycling scheme met popular resistance for its top-down imposition of responsabilised green citizenship and – initially – spatially unequal municipal provision of apartment bin boxes – suggesting a weakness in ZjN's capabilities to capture and rearticulate common sense or deal with class-based injustices.

Such a policy agenda may appear tamely reformist, merely social-democratic in ambition, certainly pared back from originally radical discursive aspirations for degrowth, commonisation and the right to the city. Such tentative first steps are explicable by the challenges of governing from the left in such a context – challenges we unpack in the following three causes. Having said that, at the time of writing, ZjN has governed for over three years with over 600 elected representatives, created an electoral programme with broad participation of over 100 members, held internal democratic elections for electoral lists with hundreds of members registering to vote, and run two campaigns with significant numbers of members volunteering their free time. An ambitious public investment

programme is being rolled out, with new schools and kindergartens being built and tram-lines expanded, alongside general reinvestment in public institutions, for the first time in over two decades; and a 15% pay rise for all civil servants and workers in city-owned companies to tackle inflation and the cost of living crisis. In the 2024 Croatian national election, ZjN's partner/successor party *Možemo!* increased its vote share to win an impressive 10 parliamentary seats. Up against extremely challenging conjunctural forces, these are no small victories. It is to these conjunctural forces we turn next.

### *Material cause: Challenging crisis conditions*

Any room for hegemonic manoeuvre on the Croatian left had to be actively carved out from within an inhospitable political settlement constructed by the violent transformation of post-socialist Yugoslavia into conflicting nation-states through the conjunctural combination of two seemingly contradictory tendencies: (inward-looking) ethno-nationalist chauvinism and (outward-looking) neoliberal capitalism (see Kirn, 2019). In simplified terms, these two tendencies combined neoliberal privatisations with the patronage-based, clientelist crony capitalism enabled by populist-nationalism to create a new ruling class – replacing the defeated communist cadre – of corrupt tycoons and robber-barons who have ‘captured Croatia’ (Hoffmann et al., 2017) and forced the left into a corner (Medak, 2013). The new criminal class exploited the euphemistic ‘post-socialist (democratic) transition’ (Horvat and Stiks, 2015) to engage in public asset-stripping and accumulation-by-dispossession and assemble criminal networks of money laundering enabled through neoliberal financialisation and speculation – becoming a target of left (and liberal) opposition. Such a regime was deeply hostile to both the old communist political society – all but dismantling the institutions of socialist self-management – and to the new left emerging from within a hollowed-out civil society, from the ‘desert of post-socialism’ (Horvat and Stiks, 2015).

Epitomising these tendencies was Milan Bandić's governance of Zagreb – privatisation, corruption and patronage enabled by Zagreb Holding Ltd. In the electoral battle for Zagreb launched in 2017 on the Jakuševac landfill – the symbol of Bandić's rotten regime – ZjN has proven adept at turning crisis into political opportunity. In 2020, Zagreb suffered three disasters of biblical proportions that would lay bare the failures of the Bandić regime – two earthquakes, a number of torrential floods *and* a pandemic. These cataclysmic events hit the city hard, exposing the disinvestment and incapacity of basic foundational infrastructures, such as water and waste, as well as incompetent and corrupt public leadership. By 2019, Zagreb was losing 50% of its water supply to leaks in poorly maintained pipes (Porche and Jeanmougin, 2019). On an eco-socialist platform promising public green investment into foundational infrastructures and greater democratic participation and accountability, ZjN won the city elections in May 2021 – with over 45% of the popular vote – and, defeating the far-right candidate Miroslav Skoro in a run-off in June 2021, Tomislav Tomašević was elected Mayor.

The successful electoral battle for Zagreb, however, was only half the fight. ZjN faced an uphill struggle to rearticulate a common sense warped by decades of brutal post-socialist transition – especially the doxa of those who staffed Zagreb Holding Ltd and held key positions of power within the city's bureaucratic machinery. An especially morbid symptom of the imposition of capitalist realism is an acquiescence to austerity (Stubbs, 2022). Here, the significant debt within the City and Holding was presented by ZjN as the rationale for certain cuts to budgets and postponements of flagship programmes; policy experts and critical friends of ZjN invited to make suggestions for implementations in the first 100 days in office were implored to make proposals ‘budget neutral’. The celebration of Zagreb's improved credit rating by Moody's (see Stubbs, 2022) symbolises the acceptance, even celebration, of the neoliberal accounting metrics of credit rating agencies, arguably necessary to borrow on capital markets to gain governing capacity in the context of crippling public debts, but by the same token conspiring against pursuit of radical auditing, if not as an alternative then at least as a complementary indicator of ‘success’.

The threat of debt and capitalist crisis now disciplines the actions of those governing Zagreb – through neoliberal injunctions to balance budgets and meet the fiscal demands of national and supra-national governments and international banks, investors and credit agencies – while they simultaneously attempt to deliver a substantive programme of public reinvestment. By 2021, Zagreb Holding had a debt of over €700 million in a total city debt of some €1.1 billion (Stubbs, 2022), with public contracts and tenders tied up in complex financial engineering and clientelist public-private partnerships. ZjN faced the difficult task of disentangling these arrangements to rationalise Holding and rebuild public service delivery capacity, while confronted by piles of paperwork to process, amassed by the previous regime. With so little trust in the corrupted and ‘masculinist’ state machinery (Sarnow and Tiedemann, 2023), Tomašević, who was being sued by the plutocratic owner of the waste contractor *before* becoming Mayor, took the tactical decision to work through every contract himself, for fear of further lawsuits derailing the left-green programme – causing a massive administrative bottleneck that, ironically, depleted energies to govern. The media has spun ‘attempts to restructure Zagreb Holding to create fewer administrative and more operational positions’ as ‘an attack on the very workers’ rights Tomašević pledged to uphold’ (Stubbs, 2022). The crisis dynamics articulated by the national media, by credit rating agencies and even by municipalist statecrafters themselves, work in the interests of maintaining capitalist hegemony and make the task of articulating an alternative all the more challenging.

### *Efficient cause: Articulation as method*

In a 2013 conference paper presented specifically on conjunctural analysis, Tomislav Medak – one of ZjN’s co-founders and leading coordinators – suggested that it was precisely such historical material conditions that led to the articulation of ZjN’s conjunctural strategy. These conjunctural conditions, argued Medak (2013), ‘set the clear limits on the left’, which was ‘marginal, oppositional, anti-populist and modernist’ and ‘mostly focused on the brutal exclusions created by the war and privatization or picked up the work from the dismantled progressive institutions of the system [. . .] reduced to appellative politics and struggling to find resources for its own work’. Excluded from the new post-Yugoslav political economy, the left retreated to ‘rare beleaguered academic institutions, mostly in the humanities; and several independent media outlets’ and ‘could only have sought to continue to function outside of the state, the market and the party’ (Medak, 2013). On the rocky terrain of the integral state, then, the left was incubated from within social movements that tended to organise as NGOs, which secured the necessary legitimacy and distance from a state captured by hostile crony-capitalist-nationalist forces. These NGOs – detailed as the formal cause below – provided just the strategic vehicle for protecting the left from political assault and driving its agendas forward through (often international) funding opportunities in an otherwise inhospitable national environment.

This was the germ of conjunctural thinking that has informed ZjN’s strategic approach from before its foundation to its current policy programme. In consciously conjunctural-analytic terms, Medak (2013; our emphasis) suggested that Zagreb’s proto-municipalist left had to

*articulate critical positions, create alliances with trade unions, mobilize other social forces and understand that without taking power no victory or concession will have a lasting effect on the policy and the transformation of social arrangements. It’s a puzzle that needs to be pieced together from different sides and hinges on the careful building of trust, detection of opportunities and forging of alliances.*

As early as 2013, then, the left’s rationale for turning towards an electoral war of manoeuvre in the struggle for Zagreb was already beginning to take shape – articulated in the terms, and through the methods, of conjunctural analysis. ‘The alliances that will be able to withstand the test of time’, Medak elaborated, ‘need to be built on more than discussion, understanding and joint action, they will



require also the meeting of structural interests'. These structural interests were to be articulated as shared material relationships to foundational infrastructures cutting across traditional class divides. Waste and childcare thus became ZjN's conduits for rearticulating common sense and assembling an urban historic bloc.

Navigating a political terrain polarised by a 'strong nationalist conflict', ZjN's initial conjunctural strategy for transforming common sense was, according to a ZjN activist member, 'to avoid getting into this conflict on the national level' and 'to mobilise people about everyday problems without necessarily hopping directly into issues such as the legacy of the homeland war, the legacy of the "90s, the legacy of Yugoslavia"' (research interview, 2022). The basic, foundational infrastructure of urban everyday life provided just the space for a hegemonic strategy aiming to cut across these nationalist-populist cleavages and transcend 'Yugonostalgia' – that complex, contradictory melancholic structure of feeling for a lost socialist Yugoslav past, which further polarises people (Kirn, 2019).

For Gal Kirn, the ideological duo of anti-totalitarian and Yugonostalgic discourse not only reduces the historical complexity of the socialist past, but even to a certain degree blocks any thought of an emancipatory present and/or future, standing as an apologetic of the past or present times.' (Quoted in the work of Tomašević et al., 2018: 64)

ZjN's strategy is an attempt at 'repeating the partisan and communist gesture' and 'affirming the Yugoslavian revolution' (Kirn, 2019: 13) in the present not by summoning Yugonostalgia or recuperating Yugoslav self-management – as some accounts suggest (Milan, 2023) – but rather by deploying a Gramscian method of 'prevision' to see the present differently, animated by a knowledge of Yugoslav history.

However, holding together an unstable cross-class coalition in fragile balance between the neoliberal technocratic tendencies and new public management ethos of the professional-managerial class that runs Zagreb Holding and the radical green-left interests of the young precarious members and supporters of municipalism – while also capturing the support of a more substantial working-class base – may require more than the vision of commonised foundational everyday infrastructures and services. ZjN's capacity to articulate a compelling vision that may stitch together divergent tendencies as a historic bloc is conditioned by the history that shaped its organisational form.

### *Formal cause: Zagreb municipalism's NGO form*

ZjN's political form is partly the result of imitation and translation of elements of municipalist democratic decision-making from the wider global movement – borrowing the idea of concentric circles of co-ordination and support from *Barcelona en Comú* through intensive exchanges with Barcelona-based activists and other Spanish municipalist platforms, notably in Madrid and Valencia. The idea of a core of key activists, never making decisions without explicitly consulting with the broader membership, with those with specialist knowledge, and an even wider group of supporters and sympathisers – the concentric circle model – was meant to challenge traditional hierarchical modes of decision-making. The ZjN 2021 electoral policy programme was created by 33 working groups, both thematic and area-based, involving input from some 200 people (Stubbs, 2021); some 10,000 citizens participated in a crowd-sourced policy-building exercise using techniques, such as public digital platforms for online voting and district-based surveys (Milan, 2023).

Yet ZjN's municipalist praxis can also be traced back to two important Croatian movements of the 2010s – anti-neoliberal urban activism and student protests – each emblematic of the 'third wave' of activism in post-Yugoslav civil society (Kralj, 2021; Stubbs, 2012). The first wave in the 1990s was initiated by anti-war, peace, gender equality, new media and human rights campaigning, out of which grew a 'network of networks' of likeminded projects that would formalise as registered NGOs, including the environmental NGO Green Action (*Zelena akcija*), which would play a key role in the Right to the City movement that incubated ZjN, with Tomašević serving as president for some time.

The ‘second wave’ in the late 1990s and 2000s saw the contradictory forces set loose by the first – *politicised* advocacy set against *post-political* professionalisation through the NGO form – get sedimented in the NGOisation and projectification of Croatian civil society, driven by a less solidaristic and more technocratic donor landscape (Kralj, 2021; Stubbs, 2012). Here, ‘advocacy-focused’ NGOs, geared towards projects funded by international donors and staffed by a nascent projectariat, reoriented activism from a conscientiously anti-war and anti-nationalist stance towards more explicitly non-political project-based initiatives in human rights, social policy and other domains. A generation of new activists trained in rather narrow ideas of ‘civil society’, ‘capacity building’, ‘leadership’ and ‘project planning and management’, the idea of a ‘third sector’ – neither state nor private for profit – as a site of employment, with a particular structure, shape and trajectory, gathered momentum’ (Stubbs, 2012: 19) and would set the parameters of the third wave, even as this wave distanced itself from this donor-driven set of agendas.

Croatian activism was radicalised through conjunctural shifts bound up with the 2008 financial crisis and the discrediting of neoliberalism. Milan Bandić’s (re)election as Zagreb Mayor in 2005 and his subsequent betrayal of a promise to NGOs to establish a centre for culture and youth activities in the iconic Badel-Gorica building led to the occupation of this abandoned factory and the emergence of the Right to the City movement, as documented by Dolenec and Tomašević in their academic and research roles before leading ZjN and entering office (Dolenec et al., 2017). The mass movement consolidated around opposition to the speculative redevelopment of the city centre’s Flower Square, with plans to build a shopping centre, apartments and underground car park on Varšavska Street; it eventually established itself as the NGO *Pravo na grad* (Right to the City), part of a global network, to continue the movement’s work, insulate participants against political confrontation, and gain the power to take legal action and attract funding and media attention (Tomašević et al., 2018).

In 2008, *Pravo na grad* organised ‘The Neoliberal Frontline’ conference, framing the struggle in the critical-theoretical language of neoliberalisation, urban commons and Lefebvre’s Right to the City, which, together with other events running to 2014, hosted the likes of Neil Smith, Saskia Sassen and Neil Brenner, and drew on the work of David Harvey and Jamie Peck. While the ‘Battle for Varšavska Street’ was ultimately unsuccessful, it mobilised thousands of citizens in demonstrations and hundreds in a month-long occupation of the site as a commons, leading to 142 activist arrests, in 2010 – predating Occupy and 15M (Dolenec et al., 2017; Tomašević et al., 2018). This intense collective experience of struggle consolidated the network of activists who would form the leadership and membership base of ZjN.

Just as critical urban theory was informing the Right to the City movement, neo-Marxism was sweeping through university campuses. In 2009, student protests culminated in an occupation of the University of Zagreb’s Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities – the philosophy faculty that had once hosted many of the humanist new left Praxis Group, active between 1963 and 1973 (Bousfield, 2021). Students experimented with new forms of directly democratic self-organisation centred on working groups and the ‘plenum’ (plenary assembly) – the basis for the ‘plenum movement’ in Bosnia (Riding, 2018) and an influence on municipalist organisation in ZjN, which developed a less fluid or direct and more deliberative and participatory form of democracy (than the plenum). This third wave of activism thus broke free of the rigid organisational and projectified NGO forms of the second wave, while exploiting their possibilities for hegemonic struggle: the NGO organisers of the Varšavska protests, *Pravo na Grad* (Right to the City) and *Zelena Akcija* (Green Action), used the NGO form to attract project funding to achieve wider political aims – ironically, a practice criticised by the far right in the Zagreb elections of 2021. Their consolidation as a municipalist party-platform with an electoral strategy arguably constitutes the fourth and current wave of Croatian activism – a wave with an ambivalent relationship to both the party form and the NGO form.

Two further NGOs were especially pivotal in the turn to municipalism and the genesis of ZjN – the Multimedia Institute (MaMa) and the Institute for Political Ecology – but almost completely

unacknowledged by other recent studies of Zagreb's municipalism (Milan, 2023; Sarnow and Tiedemann, 2023). First, MaMa, deeply rooted in 1990s media culture and critical theory, was instrumental in harnessing NGO funding to help keep alive counter-hegemonic and independent cultural activities in Zagreb and across Croatia during an especially difficult period, since 2005, of aggressive neoliberal nationalism, by developing a network called Clubture, and becoming a key initiator and mediator of the Badel-Gorica and Varšavska Street occupations and Right to the City movement. MaMa incubated radical critical urban theory, translating into Croatian the work of influential theorists such as Balibar, Hardt and Negri, Nancy, Rancière and Wark, and pioneered work on the digital commons via the free software movement. One of its co-founders was Tom Medak, who would later become an invaluable policymaker and programme coordinator for ZjN, whose ideas for explicitly counter-hegemonic strategy are inspired by a Gramscian conjunctural analysis of the balance of forces (Medak, 2013).

The second salient NGO, the Institute for Political Ecology (IPE), was the unofficial think tank for what became ZjN, publishing research reports documenting and influencing the development of commons praxis in the post-Yugoslav space, notably including an edited collection lead-authored by Tomašević, who worked as a researcher at IPE before becoming Mayor (Tomašević et al., 2018). Dolenc served as Chair of the IPE Academic Council for many years, before becoming Deputy Mayor of Zagreb. IPE was thus a launching pad for ZjN and the source of much of its ideas on the 'commonisation of the state' (Porche and Jeanmougin, 2019). Initially established as the Croatian office of the German green party's foundation *Heinrich Böll Stiftung* (HBF), before becoming independent in 2014, the IPE was the result of fruitful collaboration between three local organisations (*Pravo na Grad*, Green Action and Group 22) and HBF's Zagreb office, led by IPE's founding director Vedran Horvat. Himself a co-founder of ZjN, Horvat organises on the Croatian island of Vis the biennial Green Academy – a summer school for political debate and training young activists in eco-socialist, neo-Marxist and urban political ecology thinking, and a key site for Zagreb activists to meet municipalist counterparts elsewhere.

Operating since 2010, the Green Academy is, perhaps, today's answer to the famous critical theory summer school organised by the Praxis Group on the neighbouring island of Korčula from 1964 to 1974, convening dialogue among students, activists and new left intellectuals including Bloch, Marcuse, Fromm and Lefebvre (Bousfield, 2021). The Green Academy is well-attended by ZjN and *Možemo!* members and is of 'immense significance in fostering exchanges across the region of South-East Europe and beyond' (Stubbs, 2021), playing a vital role as a political school and incubator for collective thinking on the commons, municipalism and degrowth – the site of 'collaborative theory building' (Russell, 2019) as well as a forum for strategic reflection.

At the 2024 Green Academy, the lead author of this article was invited by Horvat – who had read earlier drafts – to present its findings to ZjN members and activists in a roundtable workshop session on 'Municipalism Between Theory and Practice' chaired by its second author (a frequent participant in Green Academies). This reflexive process of research exchange has fed into this text and demonstrates how academic conjunctural analysis can contribute to the change it studies. Participating in our session were several ZjN leaders and members who debated with each other the merits and limitations of the strategy pursued to date. That this informal exchange occurred is itself extraordinary, rarely if ever seen in party politics in other capital city contexts. Indeed, Dolenc and Tomašević participated in keynote roundtables that imparted, in strikingly candid terms, the challenges they face and what they plan to do about them; they engaged seriously with probing questions from ZjN activists and other interlocutors. These sessions also reinforced for us the relevance of many of the points we make here, while adding important nuances and caveats to our analysis.

Owing to its development through the NGO form, ZjN is riven by contradictions between projectified liberal transparency and movement-based radical interventionism, which constrains as much as it enables its capacity to govern from the left. Facing huge challenges in 'governability' (see Davies,

2021), the ZjN leadership is torn by contradictions, detaching from its membership base, largely abandoning or – as some of its protagonists would argue – putting on hold its municipalist commitment to direct, deep democratic processes. Responses to perceived gaps in governing competences often involve collaborating with advisors who embody the very neoliberal and financialised technocracy the platform was established to defeat. Much of this is an understandable response to the new, welcome demands of coordinating over 600 newly elected ZjN representatives, many recruited at the last minute, at the city assembly, district and neighbourhood levels – an overnight transition from campaigning and policy deliberation to technical administration and governance. Admirable progress has since been made with participatory budgeting in districts and new social and cultural programmes in neighbourhoods.

Nonetheless, patience is wearing thin among some party members and supporters, who reported feeling cut off from decision-making processes on strategy and tactics (research interviews, 2022) – a tragic inversion of collaborative theory building and mass intellectuality. Consultation occurs through expert working groups coordinated via meetings, mailing lists and social media chat groups, with often one-way requests for advice from the leadership without due democratic deliberation among supporters. In the first year of office at least, the municipalist assembly was replaced by a techno-politics that owed more to the project management governmentalities of the NGO form. ZjN appears caught in a projectified techno-managerial NGO form of political governance, based on a template drawn from earlier experiences in civil society activism. Several commented in interview that there is a ZjN Working Group on Animal Rights but none on Economics or Finance. The project logic works wonders for assembling a social movement around a clear, measurable objective, such as an electoral campaign, but once in office, governing under such severe pressures and contradictions reveals the limits to government by the projectariat. Moreover, the conjunctural strategic approach itself seems to have contributed to these contradictions – by playing the political game in conjunctural terms, by being all too aware and sensitive to waging a war of position on the terrain of the integral state, municipalist energies risk degenerating into autophagia.

In this first difficult year, ZjN leadership appeared possessed by a strange mix of ‘over-responsibilisation’ pervading strategic and tactical decisions – a symptom of the well-founded distrust of the judiciary, the media and the state machinery, rooted in the rational fear that any mistakes will be pounced on by the ruling regime – coupled with a loosely coordinated, discretion-based ‘hyper-informalism’ that, ironically, risks mimicking in some ways the patronage-based regime so forcefully rejected by ZjN. This has perverse consequences when combined with the ‘hyper-formalism’ of over-responsibilisation: the designer of ZjN’s spatial policy strategy, Iva Marčetić, an architect-scholar-activist with critical expertise in urbanism, property markets, housing and planning – and a principal founding member of ZjN – was explicitly not appointed to an important director position within the new administration. The official reason was because she lacked the professional legal skills required; but some see the decision provoked by fear of a media backlash over perceived hypocrisy in ZjN critiques of Bandić-style nepotism and cronyism. Thus, the conjunctural insight that ‘a successful counterhegemonic strategy cannot be achieved without a penetration into the mainstream broadcasting media’ (Medak, 2013) has been taken to its extreme in – initially at least – incapacitating governability and alienating members. The test of ZjN’s successful transition to govern from the left as a movement-party – rather than techno-political NGO – resides in renewing its capability to revive, as much as possible within the challenges and limits of governing a capital city, the deliberative-democratic practices that secured it popular support and defined its municipalist praxis. It also must involve a recognition that not all ‘normalising’ practices lend themselves to subsequent ‘radicalisation’ and that the connections and transitions between the two have to be constantly thought and rethought.

## Conclusion: What does this mean for conjunctural geographical research?

From the struggle for Zagreb to the *Battle for Britain* (Clarke, 2023) there is always something deeply political at stake in conjunctural thinking that drives the analysis. Whether we begin from a situation

confronting a neighbourhood, a city, a country or an international movement there is always something worth caring about and struggling over in conjunctural analysis, through which new solidarities and alliances across difference may be carefully constructed and creatively rearticulated. This core political sense of conjunctural thinking, we ventured in this article, has fallen out of focus with its recent urban turn, as conjunctural sensibilities have been expanded to fill the exhaustively comprehensive coordinates of critical geographical political–economy (Peck, 2017), stretched across multiple comparative cases (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020) or even refashioned into something else entirely (Davidson and Ward, 2024). Yet, the urban turn also usefully refocuses attention on the urban scale – complementing emerging global conjunctural analyses (Hart, 2020, 2023) – to move us beyond a prevailing national frame and towards the urban as a domain of mediation between the global and the everyday, one replete with conjunctural possibility (Goonewardena, 2005; Robinson, 2022).

A conjunctural geography, we argued, should foreground counter-hegemonic struggle and strategic political method, by returning to the ideas that have animated the work of Gramsci and his interpreters (Hart, 2023; Kipfer, 2008; Kipfer and Hart, 2013; Kipfer and Mallick, 2022; Sotiris, 2023; Thomas, 2009, 2023). Drawing on these thinkers, we have attempted to distil conjunctural thinking down to four core ideas – hegemony, crisis, articulation and praxis – understood, broadly, as its final, material, efficient and formal ‘causes’ (Thomas, 2023).

We put this heuristic to work in an explanation of radical municipalism as a particularly promising concrete struggle that not only represents a contemporary (and contradictory) form of hegemonic praxis in the current conjuncture (*conjunctural municipalism*) but also adopts the sensibility and employs the methods of conjunctural thinking itself in distinctive ways (*municipalist conjuncturalism*). We showed how the municipalist struggle in Zagreb can be analysed, and its conjunctural prospects revealed, through attending to hegemony (goal), crisis (nature), articulation (method) and praxis (form). First, we explored ZjN’s strategies for achieving the *final cause* of hegemony, before analysing how contextual crisis conditions *materially caused* the development of municipalism and contributed to its electoral fortunes yet constrained its ambitions. Next, we explained the *efficient method* of conjunctural articulation that animated the strategy of ZjN before, finally, narrating the historical emergence of the *organisational forms* through which ZjN has taken shape in ambivalent relation to both political parties and projectified NGOs – the latter harnessed as a movement vehicle to contend with the particularly hostile post-Yugoslav conjuncture.

In Zagreb, conjunctural thinking has deeply informed municipalist praxis both *implicitly* – via affinities between municipalist and conjunctural methods, as outlined in this article – and *explicitly*, in being articulated by leading ZjN strategists, such as Tom Medak (2013) as well as by scholar-activist critical friends of the movement, such as this article’s second author (Stubbs, 2021, 2022). Of course, this is not to say that conjunctural thinking alone defines ZjN’s strategy and tactics, which are overdetermined by multiple and conflicting influences and tendencies, not least technocratic project management, liberal proceduralism and neoliberal market rationalities as well as eco-socialist and commons movement organising. Through conjoining with these other currents, ZjN’s conjunctural sensibility may have, ironically enough, only intensified the pressures of dialectical contradictions constituting both Croatian municipalist praxis – formed in tension between the projectified liberal NGO form and movement-based democratic radicalism – and those constituting the post-Yugoslav conjuncture itself, a contradictory combination of neoliberal crony capitalism and right-populist ethno-nationalism. Nonetheless, municipalism has emerged as an experimental laboratory for conjunctural theory and practice owing to its embodiment of this double sense of conjuncture.

The extent to which ZjN represents an active reworking of positive aspects of Yugoslav socialism, not least its extension of workers’ self-management to the domain of community decision-making, is difficult to assess – partly because many in ZjN are keen to strike a balance between explicit opposition to the right-wing nationalism that has dominated independent Croatia at the national level, and a sense that too much reference to the Yugoslav period, implying the lack of legitimacy of Croatian



independence, would be politically counter-productive. The limited room for manoeuvre for local and regional government to act autonomously, especially in Croatia's capital city, is an important constraint on radical municipalism although, arguably, the reluctance to push this to its limits has been another morbid symptom of ZjN. At the height of its authoritarian rule between 1995 and 1997, the right-wing HDZ-controlled Croatian government blocked opposition figures from becoming Mayor of Zagreb and installed an undemocratic administrator to run the city. That the current HDZ government is able to tolerate a left-green administration of the capital city speaks to today's very different conjunctural conditions.

Such a (re)politicised approach to conjunctural analysis suggests several methodological questions for critical geographical conjunctural research. What does this rendering of conjunctural analysis as praxis mean for the role of scholars? Does this more active interventionist positionality collapse into existing activist-oriented methodologies, such as militant or participatory action research – or is it something distinct? Any such distinction, we argue, would reside in a sensibility towards the four causes of conjunctural thinking, threaded together by articulation: investigating and translating hegemonic formations as articulations of contradictory relations, giving voice to counter-hegemonic movements, articulating coalitions of diverse struggles around renewed common sense, and representing the forms through which change might take shape.

First, an orientation towards the *final cause* of conjunctural thinking – hegemony – through a commitment to disentangling, narrating and explaining the multiple dynamics, temporalities, tendencies and forces that construct the hegemonic balance of forces, in clear, accessible, public-facing language, for the consumption of activists as much as academics. Second, investigating the *material cause* of crisis-ridden conjunctural terrains specifically for their challenges and opportunities for counter-hegemonic intervention, focused on articulating practical strategic and tactical options. Grappling with everyday struggles, urban contestations and conjunctural contingencies should encourage a 'politics of place beyond place' (Massey, 2007: 15) by recognising how political change starts from somewhere, but is always bound up with places elsewhere.

Third, then, articulating the *method* of conjunctural analysis by giving voice to movements engaged in hegemonic wars of position and manoeuvre to intervene more effectively in the political and policy debates shaping their struggles. This may involve designing research questions and methodological approaches in close dialogue, if not equal partnership, with those movements, or mapping 'emergent' counter-hegemonic struggles 'as the basis for revealing and creating new connections, commonalities and solidarities' (Clarke, 2023: 190). Finally, conjunctural analysis reveals the *forms* these struggles take and contributes to a praxis of re-presenting the balance of forces in terms that may make their transformation more possible. Such an endeavour must resist epistemological closure and commit to heteroglossia, understood as the presentation of multi-voiced standpoints and perspectives (Clarke et al., 2015: 208). This means being comfortable with irresolvable contradictions and writing in an open, unfinished and revisable way, while recognising that any conclusions are no more than provisional and contingent on the current conjuncture.

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