



Cities and the Hope of a New World Order. The United Towns Organization Between Mediterranean Europe and Latin America (1984-92)

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This article explores the history of transnational city networks, which today form a vast ecosystem connecting cities around the world, giving them a voice in international arenas (United Cities and Local Governments [UCLG], ICLEI, C40, etc.). Their massive proliferation, observed since the 1990s, builds on a long history of structuring a European and transatlantic municipal web, which began in the 19th century. However, research has paid little attention to the evolution of these municipal movements in the late 20th century, particularly their expansion towards the “Global South”. This article focuses on the United Towns Organization (which later gave birth to UCLG in 2004), an association historically rooted in Mediterranean Europe, and analyzes its expansion in Latin America during the 1980s. The author shows that this invention of new urban policy circuits was primarily based on geopolitical dynamics. It was driven by French and Catalan left-wing forces, which, at a time when authoritarian regimes were losing ground, sought to link local governance reforms to a will to spread democracy worldwide.

Keywords: City networks, Global urbanism, Policy mobility, Latin America, Mediterranean

Introduction

The massive urbanization of the planet is now a global issue. It is on the international political agenda, particularly since it was included into the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals in 2015¹. Research in international relations and urban geography shows that the proliferation of transnational networks of local governments (such as United Cities

¹ S. Parnell, *Defining a Global Urban Development Agenda*, in “World Development”, 78, 2016, pp. 529-40; S. Ripoll, *La question urbaine au prisme des Nations unies. Retour sur la conférence « Habitat III »*, in “Revue internationale des études de développement”, 4, 2017, 232, pp. 141-62.

and Local Governments [UCLG], ICLEI, C40, Eurocities, etc.), which has been observed since the 1990s, now form a vast ecosystem capable of giving cities a voice in international arenas (UN, European Union, World Bank, etc.).² These networks are particularly active in the environmental field, but also in development, health or peace-building, and contribute to shaping the formulation of such global issues by outlining their urban dimensions and forecasting local solutions.

This paper challenges the restricted historical focus in much of these works, with their limited analyses of city networks prior to the early 1990s. More importantly, it questions the widespread empirical assumption that the 1990s marked a turning point in the history of networks, characterized both by their intense development on a global scale and by the strengthening of their political agency. According to these studies, the end of the Cold War and the opening up of international relations that followed, along with the growing importance of environmental issues, led to a proliferation of networks of cities. More historical studies are now needed to better understand this hypothetical turning point, as it is supposed to be crucial in the structuring of the contemporary global city networks. Who were the main actors driving the expansion and the strengthening of city networks? Where did they come from? Why and how did they build policy circuits with specific cities from specific regions of the world, especially across “North” and “South”? In other words, following on from calls to develop a more global urban studies³, especially from a postcolonial perspective, we need to provincialize the global city networks and their ambitions for universal representation of local authorities⁴.

Research into the history of transnational municipal movements has so far focused mainly on circulations within Western Europe and North America⁵. From the nineteenth century onwards, a municipal web was

² M. Acuto, B. Leffel, *Understanding the global ecosystem of city networks*, in “Urban Studies”, 58, 2021, 9, pp. 1758-74; K. Davidson, L. Coenen, M. Acuto, B. Gleeson, *Reconfiguring urban governance in an age of rising city networks: A research agenda*, in “Urban Studies”, 56, 2019, 16, pp. 3540-55; K. Kern, H. Bulkeley, *Cities, Europeanization and Multi-level Governance: Governing Climate Change through Transnational Municipal Networks*, in “Journal of common market studies”, 47, 2009, 2, pp. 309-32.

³ A. Roy, J. Robinson, *Debate on Global Urbanisms and the Nature of Urban Theory*, in “International Journal of Urban and Regional Research”, 40, 2016, 1, pp. 181-6; M. Lancione, C. McFarlane (eds.), *Global Urbanism. Knowledge, Power and the City*, Routledge, New York and London 2021.

⁴ D. Chakrabarthi, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, 2007.

⁵ With a few exceptions, such as the pioneering work of P.-Y. Saunier, S. Ewen (eds.),

formed around local elected representatives and technicians, agents of international foundations and institutions, who were keen to organize the sharing of knowledge about city government⁶. Studies have highlighted its progressive institutionalization in the first half of the twentieth century, in particular through the creation of the first international city networks, such as the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA, 1913), the Council of European Municipalities (1951) and the Fédération mondiale des cités unies (World Federation of United Cities, also known as United Towns Organization, UTO, 1957). They have emphasized their rootedness in movements of local politicians and professionals from Western Europe, often close to the left and to municipal socialism, who developed and shared know-how to promote municipal intervention in the economy⁷. The connections they organized through congresses, journals and study trips, shaped a new field of knowledge which, in addition to reforming the government of rapidly expanding cities, combined an internationalist utopia, a desire to establish the municipality as a key promoter of world peace, especially as a cornerstone for democratic European integration.

However, we know much less about the evolution of these networks at the end of the twentieth century, especially concerning their dynamics of extension towards the “Global South”, whose cities are now an integral part of the world’s leading associations of local authorities, such as UCLG, which was formed from the merger of IULA and the Fédération Mondiale des Cités Unies (UTO) in 2004. This organization has now almost 240,000 members from over 140 countries all over the world. This article looks at the UTO and its strong commitment towards Latin America in the 1980s. This association was founded in 1957 in Aix-les-Bains (France) by a group of French people and a few Italians, Germans, British and Soviets. Created by former resistance fighters against Nazism and fascism, who were often close to the left (socialists, Christian democrats and communists), it promoted town twinning as a means of bringing people

Another Global City. Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment 1850-2000, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2008.

⁶ P.Y. Saunier, *La toile municipale aux XIXe-XXe siècles : un panorama transnational vu d'Europe*, in “Revue d'Histoire Urbaine”, 34, 2006, 2, pp. 43-56.

⁷ O. Gaspari, P. Dogliani (eds.), *L'Europa dei comuni. Origini e sviluppo del movimento comunale europeo dalla fine dell'Ottocento al secondo dopoguerra*, Roma, Donzelli Editore, 2003; A. Vion, *Europe from the bottom up: town twinning in France during the Cold War*, in “Contemporary European History”, 11, 2002, 4, pp. 623-40; R. Payre, *Une science communale? Réseaux réformateurs et municipalité providence*, CNRS Editions, Paris 2007.

together across the major geopolitical divides, particularly in the context of the Cold War⁸. The UTO then grew around a strong western Mediterranean anchoring⁹. The majority of its members were French. They were also the main driving force behind the secretariat, based in Paris. Italian local councilors were also very active (like the Christian Democrat Giorgio La Pira and the Communist Diego Novelli), followed by Spanish Socialists and Communists after Franco's death.

So how can we explain the expansion of a municipal movement with deep roots in Mediterranean Europe towards Latin America, which in the early 1980s was still completely off its radar? What were the agendas, particularly the political agendas, behind the establishment of connections between cities from the "North" and the "South"? What innovative ways of thinking relationships between city government and the transformation of the world order emerged from this new transnational space? Drawing on the archives of the UTO (in particular its journal "Cités Unies", published between 1957 and 1991) and on interviews with former officials of the organization, this paper unveils the role and the trajectories of the protagonists of this expansion, and insists on the different means they used to produce and share knowledge.

We show that this invention of new urban policy circuits relied primarily on geopolitical dynamics led by left wing forces from Mediterranean Europe¹⁰. It was mainly carried out between France and Spain by elected representatives and socialist and communist activists, such as Pierre Mauroy (mayor of Lille, former Prime Minister and president of the UTO), Pasqual Maragall (mayor of Barcelona) and its colleague Jordi Borja. It was part of a renewed interest of European social democratic forces in Latin America, at a time when the continent was experiencing a return to democracy after years of military dictatorship. By connecting cities on both sides of the Atlantic, these actors, staunch defenders of local autonomy, intended to provide practical support to American municipalities in the construction of democracy. In these new policy circuits, at a time when authoritarian regimes seemed to be losing ground across the globe, an equation was emerging that combined practical reform of city government with a geopolitical project to spread liberal democracy worldwide.

⁸ A. Vion, *L'invention de la tradition des jumelages (1951-1956) : mobilisations pour un droit*, in "Revue Française De Science Politique", 53, 2003, 4, pp. 559-82.

⁹ S. Ripoll, *Le rêve d'une Méditerranée des villes. Entre développement et démocratie (années 1960 - années 2010)*, Doctoral dissertation in political science, Université Lyon 2, 2022.

¹⁰ M. Di Donato, M. Fulla (eds.), *Leftist Internationalisms. A Transnational Political History*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023.

We first introduce two major characters of the UTO – French socialist Pierre Mauroy and Catalan communist Jordi Borja – and contextualize their political interest in Latin America. Then we study how the UTO organized the connection of cities and the sharing of urban knowledge from both sides of the Atlantic.

Pierre Mauroy and the French Socialists' passion for Latin America

The UTO, which focused primarily on Mediterranean Europe and East-West cooperation, established connections with the “Third World” as early as the 1960s, in particular with North Africa, in the wake of the decolonization movements. However, the few twinning arrangements that resulted remained quite vague in terms of content and mostly focused on cultural or humanitarian issues. The 1980s marked a clear break in terms of the intensity of cooperation, the diversity of geographical horizons and the nature of actions, linked to the arrival of the French socialist Pierre Mauroy as president of the organization in 1984, who made Latin America his new priority.

Mauroy's commitment as mayor of Lille (1973-95), as Prime Minister (1981-84) as well as a major leader of the Socialist Party (of which he was first secretary between 1988 and 1992) are still seen today as the most iconic aspects of his career¹¹. A fervent supporter of local autonomy, he played a pivotal role in preparing and voting the decentralization laws (1982-83), the Socialist government's flagship reform, presented as a guarantee for greater democracy and local development. But his international involvement is also particularly substantial, although more rarely studied. He forged a political network as soon as he joined the SFIO's “Jeunesses Socialistes”, becoming its secretary-general in 1950, meeting leaders such as Ernst Reuters and Habib Bourguiba. His work at the head of the Léo Lagrange federation¹², which he founded in 1951, was also marked by the development of international networks, particularly in Africa. As mayor of Lille, he increased his contacts with other municipalities and embarked on a project to promote a new international image for the city¹³. After

¹¹ J. Dupuis, M. Prévot, *Pierre Mauroy, passeur d'avenirs ?*, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2020.

¹² Association for popular education, led mainly by socialists, which operated in the fields of youth, culture, and vocational training.

¹³ T. Tellier, *Histoire d'une métamorphose urbaine. La transformation de l'image de Lille au service du développement territorial post-industriel (1974-2004)*, in “Histoire Urbaine”, 3, 2019, 56, pp. 109-28.

leaving the Prime Minister's office in 1984, he became president of the UTO, seeing this organization as an opportunity to expand his networks, before finally taking over the presidency of the Socialist International between 1992 and 1999.

Pierre Mauroy was elected president-delegate of the UTO in September 1983, during the 29th International Council, which he hosted in Lille. He took the opportunity to underline his wish to extend the federation beyond Europe, when he stated that it was "in the field of North-South cooperation that the UTO has shown the most original and timely initiative"¹⁴. He insisted the following year that "twinning between European countries symbolized an important moment in this process (of bringing peoples together). Now we need to look further afield. To Africa, America and the Arab world"¹⁵. But he also intended to move beyond "traditional" twinning towards more technical cooperation, when he stated, for example, that "international aid seems faraway, the charitable gesture random; on the other hand, carrying out a shared project, getting to know and understand each other, enables genuine popular mobilization"¹⁶. When he was elected President of the UTO at the Turin General Assembly in 1984, he launched a vast reform that affected the organization's thematic and geographical priorities. It was also a political turning point: the federation, which for a long time had been run by people close to more marginal political currents (the United Socialist Party, left-wing Christians, etc.), became more firmly rooted in the networks of the Socialist Party, which was holding the central government since the election of François Mitterrand (1981-88, 1988-95). Mauroy recruited to the secretariat close political friends such as Michel Thauvin¹⁷ and Hubert Lesire-Ogrel¹⁸, who became Secretary-General.

¹⁴ P. Mauroy, *La ville, les jumelages et la paix*, in "Cités Unies", 1983, 113, pp. 3-4. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are translated from French by the author.

¹⁵ P. Mauroy, *Ouverture et pluralisme*, in "Cités Unies", 1984, 117, p. 1.

¹⁶ Quoted in *Les nouvelles orientations*, in "Cités Unies", 1984, 117, pp. 7-9.

¹⁷ Head of the international department of the Léo Lagrange Federation (1967-74). Deputy International Secretary of the Socialist Party (1974-79). Head of international affairs in the Prime Minister's office (1981-84). Deputy Director of the UTO (1984-88). Also elected as a local councillor (Socialist Party) in Suresnes (1983-2001) and Ile-de-France regional council (1986-98).

¹⁸ Labour activist in the *Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* (CFTC), then the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT), of which he was a member of the national bureau (1973-81). Adviser in the office of the Minister for National Solidarity (1981-1984), then in the office of the Minister for the Economy and Finance (1984-85).

For his first trip as President, Pierre Mauroy travelled to Central America from 9th to 16th December 1984. In Nicaragua, on behalf of the federation, he expressed his support for the Sandinistas, who had won the first presidential elections since the guerrillas took power in 1979¹⁹. This interest in the subcontinent was part of a wider political context specific to the French left. Although the French state had historically few diplomatic or economic relations with Latin America, the Socialist Party, united around François Mitterrand since the Épinay Congress (1971), made it a central issue. It was seen as a laboratory for left-wing democratic political experiments, both anti-imperialist and outside the Soviet communist fold²⁰. Between 1971 and 1981, the subcontinent was the second main destination of Mitterrand's trips as First Secretary's, far behind Europe but ahead of Africa, even though it was the historical "pré-carré" of French co-operation²¹. This new preoccupation was fueled by activists and intellectuals who contributed to the constitution of specific knowledge on Latin America, the fruit of internal journalistic work but also of surveys, reports, statistical and economic studies, political and philosophical reflections. While the most famous is probably Régis Debray, we should also mention Antoine Blanca, a close friend of Pierre Mauroy who actively supported him in setting up the UTO in the region. The son of a family of Spanish republicans exiled in France, he succeeded Pierre Mauroy at the head of the Léo Lagrange federation, specializing at the same time on Latin America issues. He followed his mentor to Matignon in 1981 as international adviser, before being appointed "ambassadeur itinérant" for Latin America (1982), then ambassador to Argentina (1984-88).

This growing interest was underpinned by several political considerations. The Castro regime in Cuba was seen as a model for fighting American imperialism while remaining outside the Soviet sphere. The arrival of Salvador Allende to power in Chile (1970), by constitutional means, also had a major impact on the Socialist Party, which saw in this experience a model for uniting the French left still fragmented between different parties and trends (socialists, left radicals, communists...). During the 1970s, characterized by the proliferation of military dictatorships across the continent, Latin America became a

¹⁹ *Le réseau des Cités Unies se développe en Amérique Centrale*, in "Cités Unies", 1984, 117, p. 16.

²⁰ M. Trouvé, *Le Parti socialiste français et l'Amérique latine (1971-1981)*, Fondation Jean Jaurès, 2019.

²¹ J. Bonnin, *Les voyages de François Mitterrand*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014.

diplomatic issue for the Socialist Party, and then for the government of François Mitterrand, in terms of promoting democracy and human rights²². These dimensions became significant in French diplomacy, particularly in terms of political relations (such as François Mitterrand's visit to Brazil in 1985 to welcome the return to democracy) or cultural and scientific relations.

This French socialist passion for Latin American political experiments was shared by many European left-wing parties. From the 1980s onwards, the Socialist International became massively involved in the subcontinent, stepping up contacts with left-wing forces committed to a democratic program²³. The Barcelona left was also heavily involved, contributing in particular to structuring links between European and South American municipalities through the UTO.

Decentralization and democracy: the Barcelona networks in Latin America

After forty years of Franco's dictatorship (1939-75), Spain embarked on a process of democratic transition, which included free general elections in 1977, the adoption of a new Constitution in 1978, and the country's accession to the European Union in 1986. The reform of the State was organized in particular around the issue of regional autonomy, dealing with aspirations for independence in Catalonia and the Basque country. The Iberian experience was quickly ranked as a "model" of peaceful transition, promoted internationally as a possible source of inspiration for countries engaged in democratic transitions, first in Latin America and then in the former Soviet Union²⁴. But behind these national political and institutional transformations, the transition also had urban and municipal dimensions, which have been marginalized in the literature devoted to regime changes. The international action of Spanish cities, especially Barcelona, was an integral part of this movement. The first democratic municipal elections, held in 1979, were followed by a substantial entry of the new majorities into global city networks, particularly within the UTO, in order to break with decades of isolation. The Socialist mayor of Madrid,

²² J. Mendelson, *François Mitterrand et le soutien à la démocratie et aux droits de l'homme*, in "Le genre humain", 1, 2017, 58, pp. 87-101.

²³ G. Devin, *L'Internationale socialiste : histoire et sociologie du socialisme international (1945-1990)*, Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, Paris 1993.

²⁴ B. Bazzana, *Le « modèle » espagnol de transition vers la démocratie à l'épreuve de la chute du mur de Berlin*, in "Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest", 30, 1999, 1, pp. 105-38.

Enrique Tierno Galván, a former anti-Franco activist, became its president in 1981, succeeding the Communist mayor of Turin, Diego Novelli.

In Barcelona, the first democratic mayor Narcís Serra joined UTO, but it was his successor Pasqual Maragall (1982-97), also anti Franco activist and founder of the Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC), who really developed the city's international action. In the 1980s, Barcelona gradually established itself on the international stage as a model of successful urban transformation, based on urban planning reform as the driving force behind local democratic construction²⁵. Here we look back at the career of one of the main architects of the Catalan capital's international action (especially within UTO), Jordi Borja, analyzing in particular its political and academic approaches to networking in Latin America.

Born in Barcelona in 1941, he studied sociology, geography and urban planning and joined the underground Communist Party in the 1960s. Forced into exile in France for several years, he returned to Barcelona in 1968 to work in the municipal services and teach urban sociology at university. He resumed his activities within the Communist Party and became particularly involved in the neighborhood associations movements (*asociaciones de vecinos*), authorized by the regime in 1965 as a gesture of openness to centralize the demands and aspirations of residents concerning their living environment (waste, road maintenance, etc.). These associations were rapidly turned into the structuring vehicle for a political opposition (activists, professionals, intellectuals) that made urban issues a key dimension in the fight against the dictatorship²⁶. Jordi Borja recalls that he was "part of the core group of activists who, at the time of the democratic struggle, developed the neighborhood movement and neighborhood associations in a political sense. That's when I learned the most about (urban) issues"²⁷.

From the 1970s onwards, he became involved at the international level in ways that combined political activism, teaching and research. He spent a long time in Salvador Allende's Chile (1970-73), a political and scientific laboratory that welcomed many geographers and sociologists

²⁵ S. Ripoll, *Circulation des modèles urbains et promotion de la démocratie. La diffusion du « modèle Barcelone » dans les « pays en développement » (années 1970-années 1990)*, in "L'Information géographique", 86, 2022, 4, pp. 69-90; G. Silvestre and G. Jajamovich, *The dialogic constitution of model cities: the circulation, encounters and critiques of the Barcelona model in Latin America*, in "Planning Perspectives", 38, 2023, 2, pp. 305-27.

²⁶ C. Vaz, *De la crise du logement à la question urbaine. Le régime franquiste et les conditions de vie urbaines*, in "Vingtième Siècle", 3, 2015, 127, pp. 179-95.

²⁷ Interview with Jordi Borja, conducted by Renaud Payre, Barcelona, 29/01/2008.

who, like Manuel Castells (another Catalan in exile), wanted to develop a strong critique of centralized and authoritarian urban planning. He taught at the Pontifical University and forged links with left-wing activists and intellectuals, notably through the Regional and Urban Planning Commission of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences. In the 1970s, as military dictatorships spread across much of the continent, Jordi Borja's first publications focused on urban social movements and their role in the fight against authoritarian regimes in Spain and South America²⁸. In the 1980s, as most countries embarked on the path to democracy, he turned his attention to the issue of decentralization, which he saw as "constitutive with democracy, with the process of democratizing the State"²⁹. Local autonomy was seen not only as a guarantee of popular participation and control but, more essentially, as the only credible political alternative to a central state associated with technocracy, dismembered by ultraliberal policies and undermined by years of authoritarianism.

After the death of Franco, Borja became an executive member of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC, Communist), specialized in town planning issues, and took part in the transition of the municipal power in Barcelona. Holding a moderate political line, he was elected to the city council in 1983, chaired by Pasqual Maragall, where he dealt with issues of decentralization and citizen participation. He was also responsible for drawing on his substantial networks to structure the city's international action, at a time when Spain was about to join the European Union and Barcelona was preparing its bid for the Olympic Games. Maragall intended to position itself on the international stage through a discourse which claimed that cities – with Barcelona at the forefront – were messengers of peace and local democracy³⁰. While Europe remained the preferred horizon, Borja and Maragall also turned their attention towards Latin America. The fall of authoritarian regimes had been followed by the arrival of new left-wing municipal majorities which saw the Barcelona experience as a possible model for their own democratic construction³¹.

²⁸ J. Borja, *Movimientos sociales urbanos*, Ediciones SIAP/Planteos, Buenos Aires 1975; J. Borja, *Qué son las asociaciones de vecinos*, Editorial la Gaya Ciencia, Barcelona 1976.

²⁹ J. Borja, *Dimensiones teoricas. Problemas y perspectivas de la descentralizacion del estado*, Instituto Latinoamericano y del Caribe de planificacion economica y social. Naciones Unidas / CEPAL - Consejo regional de planificacion, Santiago 1987, p. 39. Translated from Spanish by the author.

³⁰ O. Monterde, *Barcelona, Capital del Mediterrani. Democracia Local y Combat per la Pau*, Fundacio Catalunya Europa, Barcelona 2021.

³¹ S. Velut, S. Robin, *Latin american municipalities in transnational networks*, in Saunier,

This action was also based on strengthening links with the UTO. Pasqual Maragall became the federation's deputy-president, and Jordi Borja seconded a young geographer from Barcelona to the world secretariat in Paris.

Designing the role of municipalities in democratic transitions

Argentina was the first laboratory for the UTO's commitment in Latin America. The junta in power since 1976, which had bloodily repressed the opposition in a "dirty war" that left more than 30,000 people dead or missing, was weakened by the economic crisis and its defeat in the Falklands war. The holding of general elections in October 1983 marked the start of a process of democratic transition. These showed a clear rejection of the military regime, with the victory of the social-democrat candidate of the Radical Civic Union (UCR), Raúl Alfonsín, who became President of the Republic. Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy came to Buenos Aires to represent France during his inauguration.

He returned two years later as president of the UTO organizing its first symposium in Latin America, in Córdoba (December 12-14, 1985), at the invitation of the newly democratically elected mayor, Ramon Mestre (UCR). The UTO presented this city as a historical model of progressivism for the subcontinent, mentioning, for example, its secularization reform of the university carried out as early as the 19th century, or its adoption in 1923 of a local constitution known as the "four powers", which proposed to elevate municipal power to the same level as the legislative, executive, and judicial powers³². Pierre Mauroy came with the new Secretary-General of the federation, Hubert Lesire-Ogrel, who had already significant international networks. Indeed, he had spent most of his career in trade union movements close to the Socialist Party, first at the French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC), and then at the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT), as a member of the national bureau and the executive committee (1973-1981). During this period, he was one of the architects of cooperation with South American unions opposed to dictatorships, particularly in Chile and Brazil,

Ewen (eds.), *Another Global City. Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment 1850-2000*, cit., pp. 153-71; G. Jajamovich, *Redes de arquitectos proyectistas y transición democrática: el concurso «20 ideas para Buenos Aires»*, in "Anales del instituto de arte americano e investigaciones estéticas", 41, 2011, 1, pp. 203-12.

³² M. Gayral, *Enraciner la démocratie*, in "Cités Unies", 1985, 121, pp. 13-15.

where he carried out several missions, sometimes clandestinely, to provide material and intellectual support³³.

The symposium in Córdoba, which brought together nearly 180 municipal delegates from 19 countries, was structured around three themes: the possibilities of intermunicipal cooperation between Latin America and Europe; the training of municipal officials, with a view to consolidating local power; the analysis of the consequences of urbanization, particularly on youth³⁴. In an article summarizing the event, titled *Rooting Democracy*, the editor-in-chief of the “Cités Unies” review highlighted that “the concerns of Argentine leaders regarding the fragility and the youth of their democracy were omnipresent”³⁵. Jordi Borja, who participated in the organization, stated in Córdoba that «both in countries with formal democracy but strong centralization (Mexico, Colombia) and in those that are returning to the democratic path (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay), there is significant concern for local democracy: there is a wish to decentralize the State and to strengthen popular participation”³⁶. The city, the local level, thus clearly emerged as essential components of a country’s democratization, as “the aim is not only to build a formal democracy of deliberative assemblies, but also to avoid manipulation and paternalism, companions of popular apathy”³⁷. A regime change, often embodied by an arsenal of national political and institutional reforms, cannot therefore summarize the democratization of a society. But it implies providing the new local leaders with concrete skills and know-how to operationalize these aspirations for municipal democratization. The delegates in Córdoba identified in this perspective some structuring axes that should guide cooperation with European municipalities: the establishment of a form of stability for municipal officials, the training of local leaders, and more broadly a reflection on how to strengthen the attractiveness of the “municipal thing” to Latin American intellectual and political elites.

Similar operations were led in other countries. Pierre Mauroy and Pasqual Maragall traveled to Chile in 1988 during the rule of General Pinochet (1973-90), leading a delegation from the UTO composed of

³³ C. Roccati, *La CFDT et le mouvement syndical brésilien : origine et développement d'une expérience de solidarité internationale*, in “Cahier des Amériques Latines”, 2016, 83, pp. 151-70.

³⁴ *Le premier colloque des Cités Unies en Amérique Latine*, in “Cités Unies”, 1985, 120, p. 23.

³⁵ Gayral, *Enraciner la démocratie*, cit., p. 13.

³⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

around forty European mayors. They responded to the call of opposition figure Carmen Frei, former Christian Democratic municipal councilor of Santiago, who organized the “International Meetings on Municipal Democracy”. She brought together former Chilean mayors, elected before the coup d’état and then replaced by officials appointed by the junta. Maragall, as well as some Argentine officials, presented their experiences of democratic transition at the local level. They then met with Pinochet-supporting mayors, as well as officials from *Cenpros* (Centers for Social Promotion), described as “wild municipalities”, quite similar to Spanish neighborhood associations, which organized a form of local social action while also gathering opponents of the dictatorship. It was also an opportunity for former Chilean officials to highlight how a real strengthening of local autonomy could have helped prevent the establishment of the dictatorship³⁸.

Urban knowledge for a new world order

Latin American mayors were gradually making their way into the governance bodies of the UTO, from which they were completely absent in the early 1980s. In 1990, emblematic mayors such as Ramon Mestre, Jaime Ravinet, the Christian Democratic mayor of Santiago, Chile, and Marcello Alencar, the mayor of Rio (Workers’ Party), joined the exclusive circle of deputy presidents, alongside Pasqual Maragall, among others. Around twenty other elected officials (from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, and Uruguay) also entered the International Council, which totaled 254 members. This was certainly a small number compared to the 109 members held solely by France, Italy, and Spain (with 50, 44, and 15 respectively). This dynamic was also supported by a proliferation of twinnings between European and Latin American cities. In 1988, there were nearly 140 such arrangements with Nicaragua alone.

The challenge for the UTO, however, was to go beyond traditional twinning arrangements, often focused on very general humanitarian or cultural content, to promote more concrete and technical cooperation, capable of providing South American officials with the skills and expertise to manage transitions at the local level. The former deputy secretary-general of the federation, a French civil engineer (*ingénieur des ponts et chaussées*) recruited by Mauroy in 1987, emphasizes this point: “There was (in Latin America) a new political dimension that was no longer

³⁸ F. Descamps, *Le Non des maires*, in “Cités Unies”, 1988, 132, pp. 5-6.

East-West, but rather the support for democratic movements, and the emergence of local communities as actors in safeguarding democracy and development. It became quite strong but it was also necessary to provide substance. [...]. This turning point is interesting because it forced us to develop concrete actions”³⁹. The urban community of Lyon was thus honored at the UTO’s World Congress in Grenoble (France) due to the cooperation agreement it had just signed with Córdoba. Presented as exemplary and innovative, it built a cooperation focused on the theme of transportation, mobilizing in particular the expertise of the Lyon Urban Planning Agency⁴⁰. In Barcelona as well, a former colleague of Jordi Borja in the municipal international relations department emphasizes: “we were one of the first cities to no longer engage in twinnings but to sign time-limited cooperation agreements, on specific topics. Twinning is forever! You could end up twinned with a fascist”⁴¹. In other words, democratization as a political project must rely as much on international advocacy as on the dissemination of technical knowledge related to urban governance.

The most emblematic initiative of this new approach of city cooperation, in terms of scope, funding, and partners, was undoubtedly the Ciudagua project. Led by the UTO, it was launched in Montevideo (Uruguay) in 1988 with the participation of about a hundred cities from 19 Latin American countries. It also involved thirteen European cities (including Barcelona, Marseille, Lille, Lyon, Bologna...) and international partners, notably from France, Germany, and Spain⁴². The aim was to establish a network of cities focusing on the topic of drinking water service, a challenging issue in a continent where nearly 65 million people were not connected to running water. The idea was to promote technical exchanges on issues such as pricing, state investments, and the role of local authorities. But according to the former deputy secretary-general of the UTO, initiator and project leader, it was more broadly a matter of promoting a certain conception of city government:

³⁹ Interview with the former deputy secretary-general of the UTO, conducted by the author, 2017.

⁴⁰ S. Delbo, *La FMCU confirma su pragmatismo*, in “Cités Unies”, 1987, 128, pp. 44-5.

⁴¹ Interview with the author, 2017.

⁴² The European Economic Community, the French Ministries of Public Works, Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, the GTZ (*Deutsche gesellschaft für technische zusammenarbeit*, German cooperation agency), the Metropolis network, the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities, as well as private companies (Agua de Barcelona, Lyonnaise des eaux, Société des eaux de Marseille, Gaz de France, Siemens).

In Ciudadagua, we set up a network of one hundred Latin American cities on the issue of water, where we brought together the water stakeholders in these cities, a maximum of four per city: the political authorities, with the mayor himself whenever possible, the state authorities, the local water company and a representative of users or future users. It was quite complicated because we had to bring together four hundred people in one place and pay for everything. And the user representative had to be someone other than the mayor himself. So, we teamed up with a network of NGOs that were more or less revolutionary in some countries, who appointed the person who was to come, and the local authorities had to accept that the mayor was going to face these activists⁴³.

Drinking water service thus appeared as a technical gateway to the challenges of democratization, as it allowed the UTO to foster dialogue among stakeholders at the local level, which sometimes ran counter to more authoritarian habits. The role of users emerged as a central issue and was the subject of a new Ciudadagua symposium in 1990 in Quito (Ecuador), funded by the European Economic Community and by several European cities, which also attended the event⁴⁴.

In the early 1990s, these Euro-American exchanges took on a new dimension in the wake of major geopolitical upheavals. After Latin America, the Berlin Wall had just fallen, the USSR was on the verge of disintegration, and in South Africa, the apartheid was crumbling. In the West, there were widespread hopes of glimpsing what could be the “end of history”, in other words, the universalization of liberal democracy as the sole political horizon, the culmination of the “third wave” of democratization that would have begun in Southern Europe and then spread to Latin America⁴⁵. Like many other observers in the West, Pierre Mauroy was enthusiastic and emphasized in the columns of “Cités Unies” that now, “it is the natural state of the world to live in democracy or to walk towards freedom”⁴⁶. In October 1990, 700 participants from 40 countries gathered to discuss these major upheavals in Argentina, in Córdoba, during the thirteenth World Congress of the UTO.

⁴³ Interview with the former deputy secretary-general of the UTO, conducted by the author, 2017.

⁴⁴ *Ciudadagua Andina de Quito*, in “Cités Unies”, 1990, 137.

⁴⁵ F. Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man*, Free Press, New York 1992; S. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman 1991.

⁴⁶ *La démocratie devient l'état naturel du monde. Interview de Pierre Mauroy*, in “Cités Unies”, 1990, 141, p. 1.

Its ambitious slogan was: “Local autonomy, a vehicle for a new international order”⁴⁷. For the UTO, this was an opportunity to capitalize on the experience acquired in Latin America, because in the USSR as well, “legislative elections and local elections are perceived as two steps in the same process and the debate on the role of local authorities and their powers is underway”⁴⁸. Western cities rushed to the East and the post-Soviet transition quickly overtook the federation’s Latin American focus. It was necessary to train municipal officials who had never had investment capacities, to support the distribution of property of housing estates, lands, and equipment hitherto entirely owned by the State. The new local political leaders had now to “learn to be fully elected officials and politicians”⁴⁹. In short, the UTO intended to guide municipalities practically on the path towards liberal democracy. The essence of this “new world order” was clearly technical: it was necessary to promote the circulation and capitalization of knowledge related to municipal organization, urban planning, and financing of local policies. The Secretary-General, Hubert Lesire-Ogrel, explained it in these terms: “Our approach must be less global [...] which does not mean less political, but closely linked to the issues of cities”⁵⁰. Pierre Mauroy was even more radical when, returning from Córdoba, he stated: “What do we offer to cities? First, we give them a platform, we help them to assert their views in the face of state selfishness. But we also offer them a form of decentralized cooperation and this is probably the most innovative idea discussed during this congress [...]. So, let’s exchange our engineers and have common projects, from city to city”⁵¹.

Pierre Mauroy became president of the Socialist International in 1992 and subsequently left the UTO. Jorge Sampaio, a prominent figure in the fight against the *Estado Novo* regime and in the construction of the Portuguese democracy, then mayor of Lisbon and Secretary-General of the Socialist Party, was elected to succeed him. He would be tasked with structuring East-West relations in the post-Cold War era. Above all, he would oversee the beginnings of what would become the federation’s main project: institutionalizing closer ties with other global

⁴⁷ UTO, *Rapport d’activités de la Fédération Mondiale des Cités Unies - villes jumelées. XIIIe Congrès Mondial, 29-31 octobre, Córdoba, 1990*.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *La démocratie devient l’état naturel du monde. Interview de Pierre Mauroy*, cit.

associations of local governments, mainly IULA and Metropolis. This political approach tended to relegate technical knowledge and cooperation to the background. It led to the creation of UCLG in 2004, whose statutes specify, echoing the Latin American experiments, its intention to constitute “the united voice and the defender of democratic local autonomy, defending its values, objectives, and interests on the international stage and through cooperation among local governments”⁵².

Conclusion

This article emphasized that geopolitics is a determining factor in the formation of contemporary city networks. The transnational municipal movement organized by the UTO extended from Mediterranean Europe to Latin America, while inventing a new relationship between municipal issues and the western dreams of democratizing the world in the 1980s and early 1990s. This relationship is deeply rooted in the political history of Mediterranean Europe left-wing movements, shedding light on the way they think and link together urban issues, local autonomy, and international relations. Latin America is set up by French and Catalan communists and socialists as a laboratory, a transatlantic space for connecting cities, individuals and political experiments. Urban knowledge and visions of the world order mutually feed each other.

The narrative presented in this paper is still largely written from the Western perspective. The UTO and the sources it created in the 1980s were managed and produced mainly in Western Europe (especially France), leaving little information regarding the motivations and concrete modalities of engagement of South American cities. Deepening a genuinely postcolonial approach would require further research that pay attention to Latin American sources, in order to better understand how these cities, urbanists, activists and elected officials envisaged connections, both in their local policies and in their will to shape the architecture of global city networks.

This paper contributes, nonetheless, to broadening a historiography of transnational municipal movements over a period and across places that have remained largely underexplored. It constitutes an invitation to historians to engage in contemporary urban studies debates analyzing the role of local authorities in the emergence of global urbanisms at the turn of the 21st century. The 1990s constitute a turning point with the proliferation and structuring of city networks, but our analysis suggests that this moment builds upon and extends a dynamic that began in the 1980s

⁵² UCLG, *Statuts de l'organisation mondiale Cités et Gouvernements Locaux Unis*, 2004.

and, far from being universal, was deeply rooted in restricted Mediterranean European spaces and nourished by actors whose ambitions were not about giving cities “a seat at the global table”. Before the merger of the main global city networks took center stage, UTO’s project consisted not so much in obtaining political representation with the major international institutions but rather in providing political and technical support, through the multiplication of city-to-city cooperation, to countries in transition to guide them on the road to liberal-democracy. In other words, provincializing the history of city networks invites us to question the visions of modernity that lie behind the sometimes enthusiastic narrative of the “rise” of cities in the global arena.

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