

Commentary: The perils and promise of inter-paradigmatic dialogues on remunicipalisation

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Abstract:

Many epistemological perils of inter-paradigmatic dialogues originate from the ontological divides between schools of thought. Seeing through these cultural barriers does however offer the promise of inter-paradigmatic learning. This paper aims to suggest some basic conditions for seizing the learning opportunities that come from the competition, emulation, assimilation and regeneration of ideas across paradigms. It does so by looking at the case of the incipient dialogue between the heterodox and neoinstitutional traditions of remunicipalisation. These traditions diverge over the nature and societal implications of remunicipalisation as reverse privatisation. We thus identify three fundamental attributes of fruitful inter-paradigmatic dialogues: reflexivity as subjective predisposition to critical and self-critical inquiry within and across schools of thought; immanent critique as inquiry of the consistency between the beliefs and intentions held by the members of a school of thought and their intellectual practices; and, recursiveness as persistence in expanding learning opportunities through sustained inter-paradigmatic dialogue.

Policy highlights:

- Remunicipalisation disrupts long-held expectations of the desirability of privatisation.
- Remunicipalisation may produce radical or incremental changes in operational practices.
- The transformative possibilities of remunicipalisation should inspire economic policy reform.

1. Introduction

The current Special Issue is a welcome contribution to the growing literature on the remunicipalisation of public services; that is the return of public services to full public ownership, management and democratic control following a period of full or partial privatisation (Lobina, 2015). Remunicipalisation is an important trend that disrupts long-held expectations of the necessity and desirability of privatisation (in its various forms, including outsourcing and PPPs). It thus opens up new possibilities for the scholarship and policy of public service reform. The advancement of knowledge in this incipient field of study can only benefit from a vibrant conversation and, arguably, the most important contribution of the Special Issue is to stimulate a potentially fruitful inter-paradigmatic dialogue on remunicipalisation. This response aims to suggest some basic conditions for a meaningful debate between two contrasting yet complementary traditions of remunicipalisation. These traditions are emerging around two different forms of institutionalism, heterodox and neoinstitutional economics. Our main argument is that, if such a debate is to thrive, the two camps have to better engage with each other's research agenda. This requires carefully identifying the purpose of these agendas, understanding the categories used and contextualising the findings produced in pursuit of the respective purposes. Failing which, much risks being lost in translation.

At the risk of oversimplifying, we consider the heterodox tradition of remunicipalisation as composed of intellectual-activists (and activist-intellecuals) who share ontological concerns with critical realist microeconomics (Lee, 2018). These include an interest in the multiplicity of actor rationalities and the contingent interplay of agency and institutions, mediated by social relations and power (Lobina, 2013). Methodologically, the heterodox tradition favours qualitative case studies as a means of exploring the complexity of social reality. Politically, it challenges mainstream accounts and practices of public service reform and is committed to collective emancipation and transformative remunicipalisation as an exercise in the construction of concrete utopias or better possible futures (Lobina et al., 2019). Conversely, the neoinstitutional tradition posits that remunicipalisation is primarily a pragmatic process of market and contract management heavily informed by considerations of transaction costs (Clifton et al., 2019; Warner and Aldag, 2019; Voorn et al., 2020). The proponents of this thesis have a methodological predilection for the study of large-scale quantitative data as a way of "letting the data talk". Politically, this camp does not share the heterodox tradition's commitment to promoting radical social and economic change; hence, its emphasis on pragmatic remunicipalisation as incremental policy change instrumental to the reproduction of New Public Management (NPM) regimes. In this regard, it should be noted that NPM thinking encompasses at least two strands, one that advocates privatisation and another that promotes managerialism through an array of market management and accounting mechanisms (Hood, 1995). As a form of reverse privatisation (Hefetz and Warner, 2004), remunicipalisation subverts the prescriptions of the former strand but not necessarily the latter.

In the next section, we discuss some misunderstandings found in Clifton et al.'s (2019) critique of the heterodox tradition. The differences between the two paradigms offer fertile ground for inter-paradigmatic learning on remunicipalisation. To enhance rigour in this learning, we embrace the logic of immanent critique. This consists in "exposing internal inconsistencies in beliefs implicit in practices, or demonstrating how beliefs held cannot accommodate practices actually achieved" (Lawson, 1997: 211). The emphasis of immanent critique on probing the internal consistency of competing paradigms discourages the arbitrary use of one paradigm's aims as criteria for the evaluation of another paradigm's success. Hence, it provides a compass for navigating the epistemological perils and promise of the dialogue between the two traditions of remunicipalisation.

2. Some misunderstandings on the heterodox account of remunicipalisation

According to Clifton et al. (2019), claims of a "global wave" of remunicipalisation are uncertain because not supported by data on the US and three European countries. The nonlinear diffusion of remunicipalisation across countries and sectors (and through time) is only to be expected in the real world. From a heterodox perspective, however, it is relatively immaterial whether or not the cases of remunicipalisation found in international surveys represent actual increases. These surveys aim to shed new light on the unsustainability

of privatisation and reassert public ownership as a credible option for public service reform. Combining an international survey of remunicipalisation and selected qualitative case studies for thematic analysis, Lobina et al. (2014) identify two main policy implications: a) by not privatising public services, policy makers may avoid inflicting unnecessary and long-term social costs on the citizenry; and, b) remunicipalisation is a feasible remedy to the broken promises of privatisation. The same methodological strategy and similar concerns inform more rigorous and extensive international surveys of remunicipalisation (Kishimoto et al., 2015; Kishimoto and Petitjean, 2017; Kishimoto et al., 2020). Rather than statistical, their methodological significance is retrodictive (Lawson, 2009). In fact, the heterodox tradition seeks to use the surprise generated by increasingly extensive catalogues of remunicipalisation to inspire emulation in policy participants and debunk theoretical myths of privatisation. Therefore, remunicipalisation is neither the globally dominant trend in public service reform (pending evidence to the contrary) nor a hype (as the Special Issue seems to suggest). It is instead a trend that offers important opportunities for social and theoretical learning.

Clifton et al. (2019) construe the heterodox account as positing that remunicipalisation is necessarily a political and transformative process. This is a misrepresentation because the heterodox tradition emphasises the possibility, not the necessity, of transformative remunicipalisation (Cumbers and Becker, 2018; McDonald, 2018; Lobina et al., 2019). Heterodox normative positions on the desirability of transformative remunicipalisation are not axiomatic in nature but based on the observation of the possibility of radical and progressive change. Examples include Lobina and Hall's (2013) argument for the remunicipalisation of water in Jakarta, Indonesia and Hall et al.'s (2013) case for the policy diffusion of energy remunicipalisation. The heterodox tradition also attests that public ownership may or may not deliver progressive outcomes owing to the influence of governance (Cumbers, 2012; McDonald and Ruiters, 2012; Lobina, 2013; Lobina and Hall, 2014). Hence, if this literature pays particular attention to transformative remunicipalisation, that reflects a commitment to the co-construction of concrete utopias. It does not represent an attempt to reduce the complex governance of remunicipalisation to a single process and a predetermined outcome.

In response to Clifton et al.'s (2019: 7) claim that the heterodox literature "fails to acknowledge the pragmatic, not political nature of the process" of remunicipalisation, the heterodox tradition investigates the full variety of motives and practices of remunicipalisation. A recurrent theme in this literature is in fact that of contested governance, whereby governmental decisions on remunicipalisation are influenced by the dialectic and power play of competing coalitions of actors. These coalitions advocate rival paradigms by connecting different political and pragmatic categories, such as political representations of the good society and arguments on the relative efficiency of public and private ownership (Lobina, 2017; McDonald and Swyngedouw, 2019). It is also important to allow for the multiplicity of rationalities – including political, economic and professional rationalities - of single coalitions of actors and indeed individual actors (Clever, 2012). A case in point is that of Paris, France where the municipal government's decision to remunicipalise water aimed at achieving political objectives such as promoting social justice, while at the same time enhancing economic efficiency and good management (Le Strat, 2010, 2014). The upshot is that it is implausible to attribute a perfect monopoly on political or pragmatic rationality to any actor or advocacy coalition.

3. Immanent critique and inter-paradigmatic learning on remunicipalisation

These misunderstandings attest to the epistemological perils of inter-paradigmatic dialogues. Difficulties in engaging with the ontologies of competing traditions can, of course, be expected in inter-paradigmatic dialogues. The cultural barriers between schools of thought are notoriously hard to break. They are not, however, insurmountable obstacles to inter-paradigmatic learning in that long-term dialogues offer multiple opportunities for learning and rectifying past mistakes. In that sense, the logic of immanent critique remains central to inter-paradigmatic learning irrespective of the learning strategies deployed by the participants in the dialogue. The critique of competing schools of thought may be supported by confrontational learning strategies like retrodiction – whereby learning is achieved by contrasting theoretical expectation and empirical observation (Lawson, 2009). For this learning strategy to help the coherence and accuracy of

analysis, it is important that expectations and observations be interpreted through the lenses of the paradigm that is subject to scrutiny. The most fruitful critiques of a tradition are those that engage with the purpose of this tradition's research agenda and, by so doing, identify the limitations and merits of its contributions in light of their ability to achieve this very purpose (Isaksen, 2016). Successful immanent critiques thus enrich knowledge on both sides of the paradigmatic divide.

Learning across paradigms may also occur when the dialogue between traditions enables the making of new categorical connections across paradigms (Dow, 2004). What follows is a modest example of this learning strategy. As a result of engaging with an earlier version of Warner and Aldag (2019), Lobina et al. (2019) reinterpret the concepts of transformative and pragmatic remunicipalisation as ideal-types of policy outcomes, respectively associated to discontinuity and continuity with NPM practices (beyond the change from private to public ownership). Warner and Aldag (2019) do in fact illustrate the nature of the remunicipalisation movement in function of the prevalence of the political motivation of transformative remunicipalisation or the managerial considerations of pragmatic remunicipalisation. Their approach is well suited to a positivistic account of the policy diffusion of (different forms of) remunicipalisation, but less so to ascertaining the possibilities of radical progressive change that may result from remunicipalisation. The latter agenda appeals to the heterodox tradition. Consistently with the heterodox view that the interplay of political and managerial motivations is inherent to all types of remunicipalisation, Lobina et al. (2019) base their reinterpretation of transformative and pragmatic remunicipalisation on outcome differentials between the two categories. Hence their respective association with radical and incremental change relative to defining NPM practices such as the commodification of public services. The effect of this reinterpretation is ampliative because it lays a new conceptual ground for investigating the variety of institutional trajectories of remunicipalisation and the complexity of the social determinants of these trajectories. And, by so doing, it avoids the false dichotomy of the political vs. pragmatic motives of remunicipalisation.

The learning strategy at play here is analogical. The learning does in fact begin with the realisation of the absence, in the heterodox discourse, of an adequate taxonomy of the policy outcomes of remunicipalisation. It then continues with the emulation of the neoinstitutional discourse, at least as far as the labelling of the conceptual categories in question is concerned. The learning finally takes place through an inferential process of abduction (Danermark et al., 2002) that reconfigures and recontextualises the conceptual categories of transformative and pragmatic remunicipalisation in line with the ontology and agenda of the heterodox camp. This second learning strategy requires the analyst to judge the coherence between what is being learnt (in our example, the reinterpretation of the categories of transformative and pragmatic remunicipalisation) and the constructs of the analyst's own paradigm (i.e. the heterodox preoccupation with the multiplicity of rationalities and the historically contingent interplay of agency and institutions). Engaging with a competing paradigm's constructs (in our example, the neoinstitutional categories of transformative and pragmatic remunicipalisation) may provide the inspiration for setting the direction of abductive inquiry. The latter then centres on the production of new categories whose meanings inevitably depart from those of the competing paradigm. This abductive strategy can therefore be described as a process of emulation, assimilation and regeneration of conceptual categories across paradigms, aimed at expanding the conceptual basis and explanatory opportunities available to a school of thought.

4. Conclusions: Where do we go from here?

This paper argues that immanent critique is central to navigating the epistemological perils and promise of inter-paradigmatic dialogues on remunicipalisation. Ours is essentially an argument for rigorously and consistently engaging with the purpose of competing research agendas, while being aware that meeting different epistemological objectives requires different learning strategies. Crucially, multiple learning opportunities can be expected to emerge from the competition, emulation, assimilation and regeneration of ideas across paradigms. Looking ahead, we identify three fundamental attributes of fruitful inter-paradigmatic dialogues on remunicipalisation: reflexivity as subjective predisposition to critical and self-critical inquiry within and across schools of thought; immanent critique as inquiry of the consistency between the beliefs and intentions held by the members of a school of thought and their intellectual practices; and,

recursiveness as persistence in expanding learning opportunities through sustained inter-paradigmatic dialogue. It is incumbent on the proponents of progressive economic policy reform (Rodrik, 1996), irrespective of their preferred paradigm, to foster these attributes. This lest important learning opportunities on the social benefits and costs of remunicipalisation go to waste.

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