

Podemos and the Challenges of Political Change in Spain

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The political effects produced by the economic recession have had explosive consequences in the countries of southern Europe. They have transformed what appeared to be, at the beginning of the century, an amiable and non-conflictual postmodern depoliticization process into a great legitimization crisis. In Spain particularly, a bipartisan model that once seemed unchangeable has now been fractured. The December 2005 elections have solidified the break with the preceding consensus. It has opened up possibilities for changes that up until now were considered unimaginable.

For thirty years, the Spanish political system was characterized by great stability predicated on the hegemony and alternating victories of its two largest parties: the Socialist Party and the People's Party. Together, they accounted for 80% of the vote. The ideological difference between the two parties was somewhat artificial since their programs coincided in some key elements. In particular, the two converged in their allegiance to economic orthodoxy, which involved the containment of public expenditure, the deregulation of the labor market, and severe limitations on redistributive politics. The legitimacy of the bipartisan system came from a growing economy that offered promises of upward social mobility, and had the European Union as its model of progress and modernization. However, this rosy picture was, to a large extent, just a mirage. The levels of unemployment, precarity, and inequality were particularly high, and the welfare state did little to redistribute the wealth. Yet, for a while, the semblance of prosperity constituted an effective source of social cohesion.

The economic crisis has precipitated the demise of this consensual assumption. The dream nurtured by the housing boom has turned into a speculative nightmare, characterized by unemployment, poverty and foreclosures. The innumerable cases of political corruption are perceived by the citizenry as a symptom of a profound institutional crisis that has been induced by the collusion between the economic and the political elite. The horizon of progress that the European Union once represented has lost its appeal as the EU's complicity with austerity politics, and its incapacity to offer real solutions has become clear.

Widespread discontent came to light in the Spring of 2011 with the emergence of the 15M (the Indignados movement) and the ensuing cycle of social movements: massive demonstrations, protests regarding home foreclosures, large heterogeneous rallies named "tides" (*mareas*) committed to the defense of public services, etc. This was a period characterized by effervescence and fleet- ingness. Although it contributed decisively to molding a "common sense" for the interpretation of the crisis and its effects, it scarcely crystallized into lasting organizational forms, and thus, was not able to hold back the spending cuts decided on by the conservative government.

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This impasse was overcome with the advent of Podemos in January 2014. In only a few months, and with barely any resources, the party led by Pablo Iglesias shook up the electoral landscape by gaining 8% of the vote in the European elections, thereby sending five deputies to the European parliament. However, what was perhaps the new party's most impressive feat was not the electoral results, but the sense that a new path had been opened, one that could break with the social, ideological and symbolic limitations of the traditional left. Podemos appeared as an effective tool for expressing generalized discontent, for brokering an electoral alliance among diverse social groups, and for promoting institutional change. The victory of Syriza in the Greek legislative elections of January 2015 reinforced this idea and created a favorable international environment, with the prospect of forging international alliances within the European Union.

The elections of last December (2015) have consolidated the power of Podemos: the young party got 20% of the vote, and surpassed the Socialist Party (which obtained 22% nationally) in eight regions. By virtue of throwing a wrench into the two-party system, Podemos has also created an uncertain scenario that is likely to sustain the possibility of political change. The December elections thus bring to a close a dizzying electoral cycle that lasted for a year and half, and successively included European, local and regional elections. During that period, Podemos has had to – in the words of Iñigo Errejón, one of its founders – “run and tie its shoes at the same time.” The party engaged in several electoral campaigns without losing sight of the general elections – which it saw as its main objective while simultaneously, it had to create *ex nihilo* its own internal structure and elaborate a political program.

Moreover, while building itself up, Podemos has had to overcome conflicts related to its internal pluralism and its external alliances; it has been obliged to react to the advent of Ciudadanos – a center-right populist alternative to the two-party system that has been crossing its path. Lastly, Podemos has had to deal with the blow of Syriza's defeat in July 2015 after six months of confrontation with the European Union. Despite all these challenges, the results have been remarkable. In the local elections Podemos, in coalitions formed with “the citizen platforms,” won the three largest cities in Spain – Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia – which together make up more than 10% of the country's population. In the general elections, the party has established itself as the third largest parliamentary force, hot on the heels of the Socialist Party that is now facing a serious internal crisis.

1 — THE DILEMMAS AND LIMITATIONS OF PODEMOS AND OTHER FORCES OF CHANGE

Podemos' success and the fascination that it has exercised certainly contrast with the criticisms that it has received from leftist intellectuals and activists since its founding. From the start, Podemos was accused of “dividing the left” and of “putting the cart before the horse” in chasing votes for elections. Early on, it was attacked for “betraying its original spirit” (and that of the 15M) and for “turning its back on the social movements.” Regardless of what one thinks

about these and other criticisms – whether they are deemed honest or self-serving, accurate or deceptive – what is certain is that they reflect a permanent tension within the left that is exacerbated by the electoral scene and its competition. The likelihood is that these controversies will reappear decisively within the context of the debates about the steps that Podemos must now take.

The majority of the analyses of Podemos tend to describe its development as the result of the tension between two opposing political strategies. The supporters of each strategy mutually castigate the other camp for the party's defeats while praising themselves for its successes.

On one side, there is the “Machiavellian” strategy of Podemos's leadership. Its promoters are Pablo Iglesias and Iñigo Errejón, who model their approach on the experiences of the neo-populist governments of Latin America. Basically, they propose to delegitimize the Spanish political system by an “Overton window” that purports to redefine the inherited ideological categories and to propose “constituent” alternatives. In their view, the political discourses of the past need to be overcome – especially the axis of left-right politics, but also the self-referential proclivities of the left – while a new transversal political subject, with whom a majority of constituents could identify, must be forged. In the words of Errejón, the task at hand involves “constructing a people” capable of initiating a hegemonic political project. This strategy would justify the creation of an efficient and hierarchical party – an “electoral war machine” – capable of becoming a commanding force before the window of political opportunity is closed shut. To that end, Iglesias and Errejón argue, it is necessary to privilege those consensual discourses capable of rallying people for the project of change, even at the expense of the deepening of internal democracy within Podemos, and to prioritize the use of media apparatus such as the television throughout the process.

On the other side, there is the “movementist” strategy, whose proponents reproach the leaders of Podemos for their lack of democratic commitment, and demand both more horizontal relations within the party itself and closer relations with social movements. The supporters of this position accuse Podemos of having betrayed the spirit of the 15M by turning it into a conventional political party. Until recently, they also attributed Podemos' temporary loss of support among potential voters to this development (the party's rapid increase of popularity in the polls was indeed reversed over the course of 2015, but began to rise again during the electoral campaign). What “movementists” propose instead is an alternative strategy based on opening up Podemos to the social movements as a way of advancing its project beyond the present limits. The most evident crystallization of the movementist strategy was *Ahora en Común*, a platform that did not so much aspire to forge a coalition with the lefts – something that Podemos has agreed to in Cataluña, Valencia and Galicia – as to “overwhelm” the bureaucratic structures of Podemos from a grassroots level.

The conflict between these two lines is somewhat misleading. Notwithstanding the errors of judgment that the representatives of either faction may have committed, or the secret agendas that they may harbor, it is clear that *both* strategies are faced with objective limits that have hampered their development

and are condemned to coexist in the foreseeable future – while it is true that the “Machiavellian” line has achieved an undeniable electoral success thus far.

1.1 – What Popular Movements?

The references to social movements, in the Spanish context, have much to do with wishful thinking. The cycle of activism that started in 2011 has led neither to the coalescence of organizational structures, nor to a substantial empowerment of the popular classes. The best kept secret of the recent wave of mobilizations – defined by the rhetoric of the 99%, the people and the commons – is that behind the appeals to the “movement,” the actual protagonists are often just a small minority of very active militants.

Moreover, a considerable portion of these activists possesses substantial social capital, comes from the middle class and thus have the means to engage in politics that others don’t have. The new political cycle has enabled them to rise from the small militant circles to which they were hitherto confined and become real protagonists. However, it would be completely misleading to confuse the promotion of these activists with a process of democratization, or with the advent of popular power.

Another important point is that charismatic leadership has played a fundamental role in all of the recent successful political processes. The “movementist faction” tends to argue that the conquest of the mayor’s office in Barcelona and Madrid prove the efficiency of their “horizontal” strategy. Yet they thereby conveniently forget the enormous charisma of Ada Colau, who was already well known thanks to her television appearances as the spokesperson of the PAH (“Platform for People Affected by Mortgages”), or Manuela Carmena, a progressive judge with a prolix career and notorious record.

1.2 – “We are the 99%?”

The main limitation of the populist strategy spearheaded by the “official” leadership of Podemos is that its harbingers tend to forget that the wager upon which it is predicated proved successful in the context of deeply polarized Latin-American societies, where the distinction between the interests of those at the top and those at the bottom was a clear mobilizing force. Spain, however, has a more complex social structure. In the last thirty years a political and social group that together brings in over 30% of the national income has been acquiring a considerable political importance. Its interests and issues are over-represented in the programs of the political parties, in the media, and in public policy. This has led to a situation where groups with lower income and less social capital identify with this section of the population and thus aspire to a middle class status.

Neither the 15M, the “tidal” rallies (*mareas*), nor Podemos has been able to break this dynamic and mobilize those at the (very) bottom. This is paradoxical because those are the groups that are truly, and intensely, suffering the material effects of the crisis. In fact, it is the families who were already in bad shape *before* 2008 who are suffering most from the effects of the economic downturn.

The indignation of the middle classes is largely based on what could be

called an “existential” suffering. That is to say, on the disappointment of their expectations of upward social mobility, and the non-fulfillment of inherited social promises. It is very likely that these groups are going to suffer a serious worsening of their living conditions; yet, this will be a medium-term process. The PP (“People’s Party”) government has been intelligent enough to opt for a slow dismantling of social services. Its efforts have been concentrated on the flexibility of the labor market and the destruction of the means of collective bargaining. It is an indirect way of reducing the system of social protections that in Spain is based on career paths (for example, today’s youth will have a hard time with their pensions). It is, however, a gradual process and, for that reason, does not induce much activist outrage. By contrast, the material suffering of the lower classes should be a much more potent engine for change than the existential malaise of the middle classes; it would be much more difficult to manage for the elite, and could generate durable and shared identities. However, those social groups have been virtually absent from the mobilizations of the last few years.

1.3 – The Disappearance of Class

The cause of the shortcomings described above is, in reality, related to the political decline of the working class in the context of an anemic civil society. Contrary to what happened in Greece during the same period, the Spanish unions have played a minor role in the resistance against the existing austerity measures. Additionally, Spain has one of the lowest rates of union membership in the OECD countries, and the unions, which had played a strong role in the first wave of struggles against neoliberalism in the eighties, have disappeared as important political actors. The result has been that the 15M and Podemos have been shut out of the major workplaces and have thus been unable to forge a class identity based on shared precarization – one that would transcend the micro-identities predicated on social and cultural capital. There are no organizational instruments from which to articulate a process of empowerment for the subaltern classes, and the role of class in the current electoral cycle has been altogether minimal.

In its discourse and its practice, Podemos, like the other political organizations of the left, has been faced with an uncomfortable dilemma. On the one hand, the electoral urgencies have prevented its representatives from finding some way of intervening in the world of labor. But on the other hand, the identification with the “middle class” is so hegemonic that to renounce it in their discourse would be electorally unwise. Yet, this dynamic tends to reinforce the invisibility of the lower classes.

2 – THE ELITE’S COUNTERATTACK

While the forces of change grapple with these problems, the Spanish economic and political elite has not remained passive and has elaborated an ambitious strategy that aspires to bring the ongoing political crisis to a close and to do so “from above.” This is not a homogenous political phenomenon. The subjects of

this process are diverse and there are conflicts among them which, to an extent, cause them to compete with each other for the same political space. At the same time, they share loyalties and find points of equilibrium between their divergent interests. The three main elements of the elite's counterattack have been the economic recovery, (however timid) the advent of Ciudadanos ("Citizens"), and the conflict in Catalonia.

2.1 – The Economic Recovery

Spain is experiencing a simulacrum of economic recovery based on the deregulation of the labor market and the absence of new financial turbulences. In the last two years there have been fragile improvements with respect to hiring, but at the cost of widespread precarization, a lowering of wages, and far fewer work hours. Some groups are completely excluded from the labor market, such as the unemployed over the age of 45 and those who are younger than 25 years old. On the other hand, and thanks to the strong support from the European Union and the European Central Bank (ECB), Spain's situation in the bond markets seems to have improved. The financial crisis of 2008 no longer appears in the media, while the government has been able to produce an image of macroeconomic stability. The reality, however, is that the Spanish public debt is the highest in its history. It amounts to 94% of GDP, and reimbursement is basically impossible. Even so, the sense of an economic recovery has made its way (differentially, of course) to the social groups that have the greatest role in the media and in politics, and it has found a manifest expression with the slightly rising indicators of consumption.

2.2 – Agent Orange

The main political turning point of 2015 has been the emergence of a new political actor on the center-right, Ciudadanos, which has further fragmented the political landscape. With a transversal discourse (that is, neither left nor right), and similar in form to some aspects of Podemos, Ciudadanos defends a political program of institutional regeneration, yet without any modification regarding macroeconomic policies and the involvement of the State. This project of renovation earned Ciudadanos the label of "Podemos of the right": a technocratic yet populist alternative that shares some essential programmatic features with the PP and the PSOE, yet doesn't have to deal with the historical strains which overburden traditional parties. Despite the support of the mass media and of other "powers that be," Ciudadanos' performance in the December elections (13%) was below the expectations created by the polls. Nonetheless, with their promise of a "sensible and peaceful change" – something like a return to the financial bubble years, but without the corruption and turbulence, thanks to trustworthy administrators – they have managed to slow down the growth of Podemos, amid the loss of support faced by the People's Party, by way of providing another outlet for the indignation of the middle class.

2.3 – The Catalan Puzzle

The Catalan case is a peculiar one. In Catalonia, the popularity of the independence movement has been very much on the rise in recent years, becoming the fundamental expression of dissatisfaction with the Spanish political regime. The paradox of the sovereigntist project is that, despite having undeniably deep popular roots and an openly anti-capitalist wing, it still largely operates under the guidance of the Catalan elite.

The pro-independence yet conservative party that was hegemonic for several decades in Catalonia (Convergència, the major partner of the Convergència i Unió coalition) has engaged in aggressive spending cuts and has been mired in serious corruption scandals. Nevertheless, it has been able to reinvent itself as the bearer of the independence movement, and as the representative of a social block that is dominated by an elite characterized by strong social and cultural cohesion. In fact, the Catalan process can be interpreted as a textbook case of “passive revolution,” namely, a project wherein the local bourgeoisie mobilizes identity to reinforce its power, thereby averting the systemic crisis of its own political project.

Insofar as the debate over independence gives center stage to the territorial conflict at the expense of other political debates, and points up the opposition between the extreme stances – either centralism or independence – it may end up benefiting the Spanish right. Yet, the opposite outcome is also possible. It is, for instance, possible that tensions may erupt to the point where it becomes obvious to most people – if it is not already the case – that the only sensible solution is to hold a referendum on independence, as is done in Canada or Scotland. Among the large parties, Podemos is currently the only one advocating this option.

3 – THE CHALLENGES BROUGHT FORTH BY THE WAVE OF CHANGE

With the general elections held on December 20, a chapter in the process of political change in Spain has come to a close. If the 15M expressed in colorful fashion, and in the streets, the enormous discontent provoked by the crisis, Podemos subsequently revealed itself as an efficient electoral instrument, capable of shifting and articulating the social demands of the 15M into the arena of institutional politics.

Now begins a new phase. In the words of Gramsci, the process today is about moving from a “war of maneuver” to a “war of position.” The political landscape of the last year and a half has been punctuated by electoral campaigns calling for very centralized hierarchies, an urgent need for organizational cohesion, and a focus on television as the primary medium for disseminating political messages. However, in the medium-term it is difficult to imagine that a process of change could prosper without a movement that is rooted in civil society and without the active involvement of the popular classes. This requires other organizational forms and a repertoire of alternative actions. In sum, Podemos – and more generally, the wave of change that it rode – is faced with the following three challenges: the construction of a real party, the emergence of a popular movement, and the brokering of international alliances.

With regard to the first challenge, Podemos has so far balanced a rhetoric championing participatory democracy with the compromises and exigencies

dictated by the electoral timetable. In just a few months, a political party needed to be quickly constructed, with scanty resources and in an environment of great hostility created by the mainstream media. Podemos could count on a large number of rank and file, who were enthusiastic yet lacked expertise and had no political culture in common. It also had to attract candidates who were prepared to run and remain loyal to the party, while at the same time, filtering out mere careerists. The effects of such a process are certainly debatable and have generated much controversy. However, what is clear is that there are many tasks and challenges ahead if what is to be constructed is an instrument that will prove not only capable of competing electorally, but also of adapting to the idiosyncrasies of different territories – a particularly important trait in a country as decentralized as Spain – in addition to accommodating a variety of political sensibilities – and all without putting into question the cohesion of the party or indulging in a destructive internecine factionalism.

Despite the importance and difficulty of these challenges, however, meeting them should not come at the expense of another and even more important task: the construction of a movement that is truly popular, and in which the preeminence of the so-called “activists” could be attenuated through the incorporation of those who were hit hardest by the crisis: the workers, the precariously employed, the migrants, etc. The objective of such a movement would not be so much to take it to the streets, as some discourses that tend to glorify demonstrations would lead us to believe, but to articulate an organized civil society that would oppose effective counter-powers to the devastating effects of the market. Obviously, a popular movement cannot be built with a master plan designed from above. The efflorescence of the social fabric is a function of spontaneous and, for that reason, unpredictable factors. However, it is up to organized political forces to accompany the process, while refraining from the temptation of instrumentalizing the movement. In this regard, the world of labor deserves greater attention, as it has been the unresolved issue of the current political cycle.

The third challenge pertains to the international arena. The recent experience of Syriza in Greece has once again exposed the democratic limits of the European Union, and emphasized the difficulties that any alternative will have to face. It is true that the size of the Spanish economy would hypothetically give an anti-Troika government a more advantageous position from which to renegotiate the debt. Having said that, however, without creating alliances in the rest of the continent, bringing such a negotiation to a successful outcome would prove extremely complicated. For that reason, the triumph of Jeremy Corbyn in the primaries of the British Labour Party, and the creation of a leftist government in Portugal – thanks to alliances between the Socialist Party, the left bloc (BE), and the Portuguese Communist Party – are auspicious news. In fact, symmetrically speaking, one may also wonder about what would happen to the hegemonic position of Germany in Europe if the sovereigntist extremeright were to win the elections in France.

To be sure, the future of the European Union is uncertain. Not only because the refugee crisis has caused European institutions to lose whatever credit they

still had as a moral point of reference for its professed ideals, but also because the current European Monetary Union presiding over the Eurozone is clearly unsustainable. The alternative, however, is not clear either. This proved to be the case in Greece, and now also in Spain. Nevertheless, in the climate of crisis, and of accelerated political transformation that we are now experiencing, it is not impossible that the ascent of Podemos will help induce a counter-hegemonic process at the level of the continent: a grassroots Europeanism that would enable the popular classes to lead a democratization of European institutions.

Translated by Diego Arrocha