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# STRATEGIC CROSSROADS

THE SITUATION OF THE LEFT  
IN SPAIN

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We appreciate the comments to previous versions of this report by Vera Bartolomé, Inés Campillo, Mario Candeias-Bechstein, Carlos de Castro and Javier Moreno, as well as the kindness of Martín Portos in providing us with the data of the p. 15.

The text was written in the summer of 2018 and does not include two recent and significant events that could reconfigure the political space: the irruption of the far-right party Vox (which obtained 11% of the vote in the Andalusian elections of December 2018) and the Podemos crisis in Madrid that has led to the creation of a new space headed by Iñigo Errejón.

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# INTRODUCTION



The Great Recession of 2008 unleashed a decade of great political turmoil in Europe, particularly in the countries of Southern Europe. The responses to the neoliberal crisis have taken different forms and orientations, which oscillate between authoritarian regression and democratic hope in different countries. In the *chiaroscuro* of this situation, the left has had different fates: in Greece, it took power only to suffer a severe blow from the Troika, in Portugal, it supports a successful social democratic government, and in Italy, it has been eclipsed by a xenophobic upset of the political map.

The case of Spain is of special interest. In the last decade, there has been a boom in social mobilisation. This has seen spectacular expression in the areas of feminism and the defence of the right to housing, and a strong increase in the capacity of the left to introduce its agenda into the public sphere. Above all, the Spanish left has experienced great changes related to two singular phenomena that have attracted the attention of many activists and observers from other countries: the outbreak of 15M (or “movement of the outraged” – *los indignados*) and the emergence of Podemos. This wave of political change has produced some transformation of common sense and unequal electoral results: various municipalist platforms won mayoral elections in the main Spanish cities in 2015. However, central government has been in the hands of the right-wing Popular Party (2011–2018) until very recently, when it was ousted by a motion of censure motivated by a corruption scandal.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the differences between the initiatives that emerged from 15M and Podemos – the assembly-oriented and diffuse character of a movement distrustful of political institutions as opposed to the hyper-leadership of a party focused on electoral competition – both phenomena share some new features. These are far removed from the rhetorics and repertoires of the more traditional left, and reflect the same social dynamics. The general picture of the Spanish left, however, is not reducible to the legacy of 15M and the possibilities of Podemos.

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One of the leitmotifs of this political cycle has been the “convergence” (or unity) of different actors and forces opposed to neoliberal and austerity policies. For this reason, a panorama of the Spanish left must encompass that complex constellation which includes political forces such as Izquierda Unida (IU) and the so-called local and regional “confluences,” various social movements and mobilisations, and workers’ unions. But we must also be aware of certain underlying social dynamics that shape the scenario of political conflict.

The emergence of new actors has also changed debate within the left. The “new politics” (a widespread but questionable label) of these years has brought new concepts such as “populism,” “centrality” or “transversality,” about which there have been endless discussions. However, after the often-crude disagreements about these labels, we can still discern some of the old problems and dilemmas of the left, though these are sometimes obscured

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1 The trigger for the motion of censure was the court ruling in the Gürtel case, which confirmed the existence of a system of bribes and illegal financing of the Popular Party developed since its founding in 1989.

by sterile polemics. These are: how to fight for cultural hegemony without being trapped by the dominant values, how to forge effective and democratic organisational tools, how to overcome pre-existing divisions and build broad social blocks to win elections, and how to combine different strategies for political change. The emergence of the “new politics” has not been able to escape these dilemmas, but it has served as a laboratory for renewing our political imagination (although the results of that experimentation have been uneven).

The purpose of this paper is to offer an overview of the current situation of the left in Spain. Our double objective is to describe the main aspects – trajectories, actors, issues and debates – of this situation, but also to offer an assessment of the possibilities, limitations and dilemmas of the Spanish experience.

The work is divided into three parts. The first part (sections 1 and 2) consists of a chronological narrative of the historical trajectory of the left. The second part (sections 3 to 8) addresses six key issues in order to provide a general picture of its current situation. These are: electoral dynamics and the reconfiguration of the party map, attempts to democratise political organisations and their ambivalent results, the emergence and retreat of various social mobilisations, the role played by the world of labour, the experience of the governments of change in the main cities, and the complex Catalan conflict. In the third and last part, we offer a brief reflection on some of the main current debates and we indicate how the Spanish experience can offer some lessons for the renewal of the left in other places.





NOBODY  
EXPECTS THE  
SPANISH REVOLUTION

THE LEFT BEFORE 15M

To understand the situation of the left in Spain – its actors and debates – we need to follow its trajectory since the transition to democracy (1975–1982). This is known in Spain simply as “the Transition” because it was then that the political map solidified in a form that lasted until recent years, and many of the current debates look back to that period.

There were of course previous traditions, but Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975) uprooted them and blocked their development. The Spanish left of the first half of the 20th century consisted basically of two families: the socialist and the anarchist,<sup>2</sup> but both lost their force after their defeat in the Civil War (1936–1939). The echo of their legacy has reappeared later, but not always under those banners.

The fight against Franco was led by the PCE (Communist Party of Spain), a small organisation during the Second Republic (1936–1939), which under the dictatorship came to be known as *the party*. After a very harsh repression, the democratic opposition began to resurface in the sixties. The leading voice in the factories was that of the *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO) [Workers’ Commissions], an ideologically inclusive and organisationally horizontal “socio-political movement” that prompted an escalation of strikes. A powerful neighbourhood movement developed in working class’ districts that merged the struggle for basic infrastructure with the work of grassroots politicisation. And in the universities, students soon broke with the regime – to which many of their parents belonged – and aligned themselves with anti-Francoism. The PCE managed to link the three struggles and bring together the social classes that supported them.

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In the seventies, there was an explosion of radical political groups to the left of the PCE.<sup>3</sup> However, the most serious rivalry came from the PSOE. The Socialist Party was re-established in 1974 under the leadership of a young Felipe González and with the support of European social democrats. It initially adopted a leftist rhetoric in line with the dynamics of political radicalisation, but soon jettisoned all revolutionary markers (including the label of “Marxist” that it had previously adopted) in order to expand its electoral base to more moderate sectors. The PCE tried to do something similar (and also stopped defining itself as “Leninist”) with the hope of playing a role similar to that of the Italian PCI in the democratic era that was about to open up.<sup>4</sup>

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2 The PSOE (Spanish Workers Socialist Party) and the UGT (General Union of Workers) made up the socialist family, and the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) union and the FAI organisation (Iberian Anarchist Federation) the anarchist one.

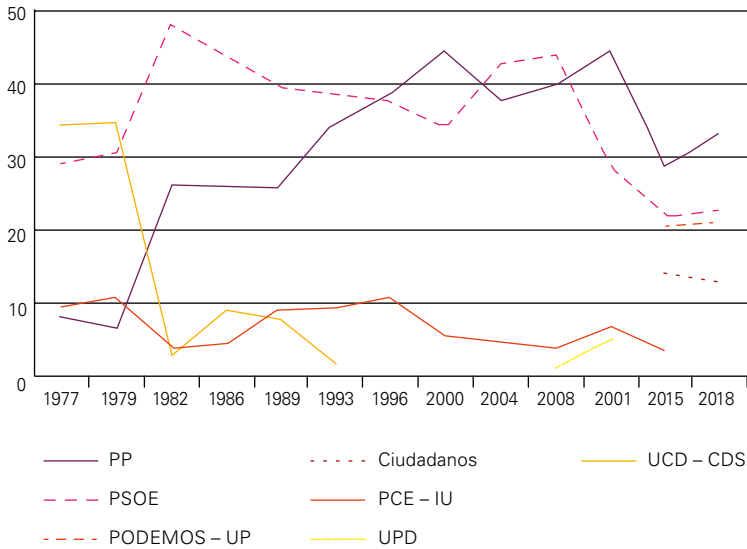
3 The main ones were the ORT (Revolutionary Labour Organisation), the PTE (Labour Party of Spain) and the MCE (Spanish Communist Movement) of Maoist direction, and the LCR (Revolutionary Communist League) of Trotskyist tendency. The attempts of unity between them failed: the first two joined in 1979 (PTE-ORT) and dissolved the following year; the second two merged in 1991, under the Alternative Left project, which was dissolved two years later. A part of the LCR joined with Izquierda Unida in 1995, creating the current Espacio Alternativo (Alternative Space).

4 Andrade, Juan A.: *El PCE y el PSOE en (la) Transición: la evolución ideológica de la izquierda durante el proceso de cambio político*, Madrid, Siglo XXI, 2012.



Nevertheless, the electoral results were favourable to the PSOE: in the first elections in 1977, it obtained 29% of the vote versus the PCE's 9%, a gap that increased in 1982 (48% versus 4%), which gave it an absolute majority. It won the hegemony of the left thanks to both international support and its own successes, among them, a young charismatic leadership that did not identify with the warlike past, unlike the PCE's old guard.

## RESULTS OF THE GENERAL ELECTIONS (1977-2016)



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**Source and notes:** Ministry of the Interior. From the 1986 elections, the PCE appears within the Izquierda Unida coalition; in those of 2016, Izquierda Unida appears within the coalition Unidos Podemos. UCD was the hegemonic centre-right party until its implosion in 1982; its leader Adolfo Suárez later founded the CDS. The UPD was a centre party opposed to Catalan and Basque nationalism.

The Transition also set the rules and consensus of Spanish political life in the following decades, usually referred to as the “regime of 78” (for the year in which the Constitution was adopted). Unlike in Portugal, the dictatorship was not overthrown, and the transition to democracy took place through negotiation. According to a popular expression, there was a “balance of weakness” between Francoist elites that could not keep the dictatorship going, and a democratic opposition that could not break them. The result was an agreement, supported by both the PSOE and the PCE, which prevented, among other things, a purging of the police and judicial apparatus and the formation of a federal republic. The effects of the transition on the democratic quality of the Spanish political system have been highlighted in recent years.<sup>5</sup>

5 Fishman, Robert M.: Democratic Practice: rigins of the Iberian Divide in Political Equality (in print).

Critique of the Transition and the role played by its organisations at that time has been a key element of the rhetoric of the Spanish left in the last decade, frequently suscitating a generational controversy between those who were active in the Transition and those who were born under democracy. But in truth, the criticism is not directed so much at what was done, but at what was *said* to have been done, that is, at the way in which a relative defeat was presented as an indisputable victory. This story was the founding myth of Spanish democracy and an uncritical source of legitimisation of the political system, but it has been seriously questioned in recent years.

The victory of the PSOE in 1982 set the tone for the following decades. The socialist governments (1982–1996) applied a neoliberal economic policy, but they barely saw their electoral support diminished: the PSOE became a hierarchical electoral machine with a strong leadership and a weak base, capable of drifting with little electoral cost. A policy of improving public services and modernising infrastructures that cemented its hegemony among different social classes also contributed to this. The PCE collapsed electorally and many of the radical cadres – ex-communist militants, neighbourhood activists, and leaders of the radical left – were absorbed by the PSOE, thus demobilising the left. Spain’s entry into NATO, following a referendum called by the socialist government in 1986, culminated in the defeat of left-wing projects, which lowered the aspirations of an entire political generation.

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The most serious opposition came from the unions. The trade union map after the Transition, as in other Southern European countries comprised by two large unions: the UGT and the CCOO,<sup>6</sup> which for many years fought in parallel to their parties of reference (the PSOE and the PCE, respectively). However, the neoliberal economic policy of the PSOE caused a rift in the socialist family and both unions opposed labour deregulation with three general strikes (1988, 1992 and 1994). With a reduced base of affiliates (around 15%), battered by deindustrialisation and precariousness, the unions ended up losing their challenge to the government, favouring a turn towards “social peace” that has lasted until today.

The mobilisations against NATO led to the creation of Izquierda Unida in 1986: an alliance of the PCE with other small parties that tried to renew the rhetoric and practice of the traditional left in dialogue with new social movements, but which was hampered from its inception by the inertia of old organisational and cultural dynamics. It achieved its best results (around 10%) under the charismatic leadership of Julio Anguita in the mid-nineties, coinciding with the PSOE crisis under corruption scandals and union protests. However, the combination of an adverse electoral system – which encourages “useful voting” for majority options – and the hostility of the main “progressive” media group, as well as its own mistakes, prevented

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6 In 1976, CCOO became a “conventional” union, abandoning its character as a “socio-political movement.” The timid attempts to create a single union confederation ran into the refusal of UGT. This union, like its sister party, had disappeared during the dictatorship and was later promoted by European social democracy, which did not view positively the possibility of a trade union movement hegemonised by the Communists.

it from breaking through that ceiling, and during the first fifteen years of the new century it went back to results of around 5% of the vote.<sup>7</sup>

With this panorama, the left experienced an unending impasse, in which certain successful mobilisations (like that against compulsory military service) or hopeful mobilisations (such as anti-globalisation protests) served as a substitute in the absence of more ambitious projects. With the turn of the century, a new generation born after the dictatorship was politicised with mobilisations against the Iraq War, the struggles of the student movement, and the V for *Vivienda* (housing) protests,<sup>8</sup> but it did so many times with its back turned to the political parties.

Izquierda Unida was unable to challenge the hegemony of the PSOE by attracting its disenfranchised voters, not even when Zapatero turned to austerity policies in the spring of 2010. Transition generation leaders blocked all attempts to re-establish this organisation. However, despite the glass ceiling that blocked its growth, Izquierda Unida was important for the continuity of an oppositional tradition. Many cadres of the Spanish left passed through this organisation, although not all of them remained there long. Internal crises were a recurrent feature, causing various splits, although they all ended in either extra-parliamentarianism or in the PSOE.<sup>9</sup> When Podemos was born, it did so looking askance at Izquierda Unida, with a view to occupying a space that the latter lacked the resolution to claim, and a determination not to repeat its mistakes.

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7 Ramiro, Luis: *Cambio y adaptación en la izquierda. La evolución del Partido Comunista de España y de Izquierda Unida (1986–2000)*, Madrid, CIS, 2004. and, in a more political vein, historian Andrade, Juan / Anguita, Julio: *Atraco a la memoria*, Madrid, Akal, 2014.

8 A movement protesting against young people's difficulties in accessing housing.

9 The main ones were the Orthodox Communists of Corriente Roja (2004), the Trotskyists of Espacio Alternativo (reestablished as Izquierda Anticapitalista – Anticapitalist Left – after its exit in 2007), and the ecologists of Equo (which was not part of IU but drew in some of its leaders). The most important split was that of Nueva Izquierda – New Left – (1999), which ended up in the PSOE.

**THE LEFT AFTER 15M**



The normality of Spanish politics began to break down on 15 May 2011 (15M), a date that divides recent history into a before and after. No matter how piecemeal a social transformation was taking place – at different levels and with different rhythms –, the enormous symbolic impact of this event suddenly triggered dynamics of conflict and renewal, but also of continuity and reconstitution.

15M surprised the entire left to a greater or lesser extent. It was the first time a critical mobilisation had struck such a chord, with demands expressed through simple dichotomies – new politics against old, those at the bottom against those at the top, democracy against the market, and so on – which had strong expressive capacity and which reconfigured the political language. The irruption of citizens' indignation altered to a certain extent the frames of the public debate and made all the political and social actors feel obliged, each in their own way, to adjust their rhetoric to the new social reality.<sup>10</sup>

15M was a movement that arose spontaneously from a series of demonstrations called on Sunday 15 May 2011, a week before the municipal and regional elections, in many cities throughout Spain, under the slogan "We are not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers." The call came from small organisations with little presence. However, it produced a spectacular snowball effect throughout the country: camps and permanent citizen assemblies sprang up in more than seventy cities and towns, whose shared ideology was a profound rejection of bipartisanship, a demand for direct political participation, a condemnation of austerity measures, a denunciation of corruption, and a critique of financial speculation. This spontaneity went hand in hand with active but respectful participation by experienced activists, who contributed toward strengthening the movement without drowning its creativity with traditional left repertoires and disputes. Their contribution also closed off the path to possible drifts of the movement towards an anti-political or liberal stance (elements that in some way were also present at the beginning).<sup>11</sup>

The irruption of 15M led to a change in the left's analysis. In various sectors, and especially among the youngest activists, it was concluded that it was time to question the "regime of 78" and not just a particular government and its policies. That is, directing criticism at the main actors and institutions that had dominated Spanish politics for three decades under the bipartisan system of PSOE and PP (Popular Party). The expression "regime of 78" has been criticised as imprecise or self-interested,<sup>12</sup> but it certainly has analytical utility. Using the

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10 An academic overview of 15M and its context can be seen in Romanos, Eduardo: *Late Neoliberalism and Its Indignados: Contention in Austerity Spain*, en Andretta, M. / Della Porta, D. / Fernandes, T. / O'Connor, F. / Romanos E. / Vogiatzoglou, M. (eds.), *Late Neoliberalism and its Discontents in the Economic Crisis*, London, Palgrave McMilliam, 2016, 131–167. In a more political vein, see Rodríguez, Emmanuel: *La política en el ocaso de la clase media. El ciclo 15M-Podemos*, Madrid, Traficantes de Sueños, 2017.

11 Moreno Pestaña, José Luís: *Le mouvement du 15-M: social et 'libéral', générationnel et 'assembléiste'*, in: *Savoir-Agir* 17, 2011, 113–118.

12 Sánchez-Cuenca, Ignacio: *La desfachatez intelectual: Escritores e intelectuales ante la política*, Madrid, Los libros de la catarata, 2016.



metaphor of the game,<sup>13</sup> we could say that the target of criticism was not so much the *plays* (or policies) of specific governments, nor the *nature* of the game (capitalism), but rather the *rules* that had governed the game of politics, the economy, and Spanish culture since the end of Francoism (and the factual powers that supported them). The propositional correlate of this criticism was to promote a “constituent process” that would redefine the consensus of Spanish society on a democratic and egalitarian basis, although the content and viability of this strategic horizon were largely unspecified.

15M was an explosive and fleeting movement that, in its camp-outs phase, barely managed to survive the summer of 2011. However, the political energy that it brought to light lasted for two years, during which Spanish society maintained a very high level of mobilisation.<sup>14</sup> Its most visible and original expressions were the “tides” and the PAH (*Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*: Platform of Those Affected by Mortgages). The “tides” were mobilisations of citizens and workers in defence of public services. They started in the fall of 2011 with the “green tide” (the colour of the shirts worn by their organisers) in defence of public education, a mobilisation that incorporated part of 15M’s organisational and discursive strategies. Shortly afterwards arose the “white tide,” of almost equal amplitude, focused on the defence of public health, and then other more minority-based movements, such as the “orange tide” in defence of social services and the “maroon tide” of young people who had emigrated abroad.

The PAH had emerged before 15M, but received a great boost thereafter. The unemployment brought about by the crisis caused the eviction of thousands of people who could not afford to pay with their mortgages. The PAH managed to organise many of these people by combining actions to put a stop to evictions in the neighbourhoods with campaigns to introduce this dramatic phenomenon into public debate and bring about policies ensuring the right to housing.<sup>15</sup> Many of its cadres – such as Ada Colau, mayor of Barcelona and Irene Montero, Podemos’ parliamentary spokesperson – would end up playing a leading role in the so-called “new politics.”

Since then, citizen mobilisations have not disappeared from Spanish political life and have had very impressive peaks, such as the Marches for Dignity that travelled through Spain from town to town in 2014, the neighbourhood uprisings in Burgos and Murcia and, especially, the spectacular cycle of feminist mobilisations that culminated in the women’s strike of 8 March.

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13 Alford, Robert / Friedland, Roger: *Powers of theory: capitalism, the state and democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

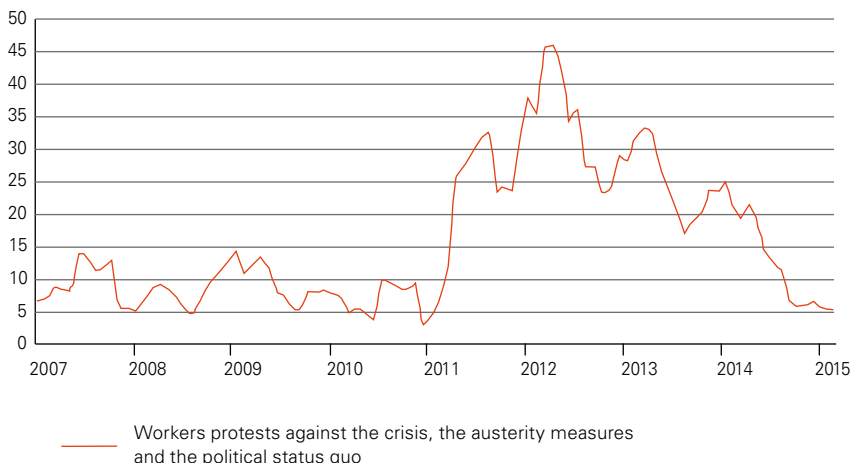
14 The main milestones were the global demonstration against the Euro accord (June 2011), the global march against austerity (October 2011), the Surround Congress (September 2012), the general strikes (March and November 2012), the Marches for Dignity (March 2014) and the PAH public denunciations (June 2013). See Portos, Martín: *Mobilización social en tiempos de recesión: un análisis de eventos de protesta en España, 2007–2015*, in: *Revista Española de Ciencia Política* 41, 2016, 159–178.

15 Martínez, Miguel A.: *Bitter wins or a long-distance race? Social and political outcomes of the Spanish housing movement*, in: *Housing Studies*, 2018, 1–24.

However, it was clear already by the autumn of 2013 both only that the citizen protests were losing momentum and above all, that high intensity mobilisation was not a sufficient tool to bring about a deep political transformation.

### EVOLUTION OF THE MOBILISATIONS (2007–2015)

Trade union protests focused on the crisis, or against austerity or the political status quo (moving averages)



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**Sources and notes:** Martín Portos, “Keeping dissent alive under the Great Recession: no-radicalisation and protest in Spain after the eventful 15M/indignados campaign,” *Acta Politica* (in press). The data comes from a database prepared by the author based on news in the newspaper *El País*. The horizontal axis collects the number of monthly protests (more precisely, the moving average of the five periods around that month).

At that time, the networks of activists close to 15M began to debate the idea of “storming the ballot boxes”. Many activists who were previously reluctant to participate in political institutions began to consider seriously the possibility of launching electoral platforms that transformed the indignation of 15M into an instrument of political-institutional change. In this sense, the example of Syriza in Greece was key: the idea of a “Spanish Syriza” that grouped together the organised left for electoral purposes and opened up to new forms of citizen participation began to circulate as a feasible project for the electoral cycle that was coming in the next two years (2014–2015).

Izquierda Unida was the best placed actor to lead that project, but the inability of its leading team (still belonging to the Transition generation) to read the situation and be open to other subjects convinced many activists that the initiative had to come from outside of this organisation.<sup>16</sup> However, there was no organic continuity between the 15M movement and the new political forces; the debate about what strategy to follow and with what type of organisation was limited to some sectors of activists. In other words, these options did not arise from the grassroots and, given the circumstances, it is not clear that this was possible. The most successful wager was, without any doubt, that of Podemos; although it was not the only one – other projects died along the way, such as the techno-political proposal of Party X, many of whose promoters would later come to Podemos.

Podemos began to take shape in the summer of 2013, in conversations between a small group of political science professors from Universidad Complutense de Madrid – who in the previous years had acted as advisers for the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador – and some leaders of the Anti-Capitalist Left.<sup>17</sup> Podemos appeared in public in January 2014 and began its trajectory exploiting the public charisma that Pablo Iglesias had achieved as a television talk show host. Like 15M, it had an explosive and completely unexpected growth. With just a few months of life, without budget or organisation, and faced with silence from the media, it achieved 8% of the vote and five seats in the European elections of May 2014. The irruption of Podemos opened a new stage for the left in Spain.

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16 The general coordinator of IU, Cayo Lara, held that IU was the Spanish Syriza and there was no need to look for it elsewhere. Pablo Iglesias himself was initially of the opinion that any project should count on IU (see his article “¿Puede IU superar al PSOE?” in *Público*, 13 August 2013; and the answer he gave to a critic on Twitter: “I do not consider feasible a state electoral project that is not led by IU, do you?”). The IU’s refusal to renew itself made him change his mind, but even in the weeks after the creation of Podemos, Iglesias sought an agreement with IU to run at the elections together with a candidacy elected through open primaries, a proposal that IU categorically refused.

17 See note 9.



# THE POLITICAL GAME BOARD AND THE SYSTEM OF PARTIES

Thus the emergence of Podemos marked the second milestone of this political cycle. Its spectacular and unexpected result in the 2014 European elections was the sign that the bipartisan system could turn around. A few weeks later, King Juan Carlos abdicated to his son and Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, the veteran leader of the PSOE, announced his retirement. Many interpreted these gestures of renewal of the faces of the establishment as responses to the fear aroused by the new situation. In the following months, thanks to the “honeymoon” effect, the polls gave Podemos the highest voting intention, fuelling the illusion that it could indeed win the elections.

The success of Podemos derived largely from its “populist” discursive strategy.<sup>18</sup> In short, it was a case of taking advantage of a crisis to appeal to the social majorities over pre-existing ideological divisions, dividing the political space in two opposing fields: the “people” against an elite that had plundered the country and taken over its institutions. Podemos did not present itself as “another” or the “real” party of the left, to avoid being cornered at that end of the discursive space. It was a party that appealed to “the people” against “the caste” and emphasised “transversal” demands - criticism of corruption and speculation, calls for renewed democracy – that could gain the support of a social majority, to the detriment of the identity-based symbology of the left.<sup>19</sup> Its leader, Pablo Iglesias, summed it up like this: “power does not fear the left, it fears the people.” This strategy was undoubtedly successful, but generated misgivings in a part of that left that saw in it an opportunistic renunciation of ideological principles.<sup>20</sup>

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Some of those criticisms came from Izquierda Unida, which not only saw its expectations of electoral growth thwarted, but also began to fear for its own future, in what seemed like a repeat of what had happened to the PCE after the Transition. It was the beginning of a series of disagreements, reinforced by the reluctance of Podemos to coalesce with a force that, in its opinion, could reduce the credibility of a rhetoric that was abandoning the clichés of the traditional left and expanding its base and capturing votes from de-ideol-

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18 The rise of the term “populism” has been accompanied by enormous conceptual confusion. In academic debate researchers do not agree on how to define it, in political dispute it is simply employed as a disqualifying epithet and, in that sense, has represented the main criticism against Podemos. The problem is that this confusion has also spread to the political debate within the Spanish left, so that many discussions around (or against) the populism of Podemos put a number of things in that box. These include: a discursive framework that dichotomises the political field, the importance given to communicative strategies, the relevance of political leadership, the flight from the identity references of the traditional left, the use of plebiscitary methods or vertical structures, and the belief that politics is autonomous from its material bases. Hence very often, when discussing populism, it was impossible to know exactly what was being discussed.

19 In the jargon of Ernesto Laclau (*On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005) – who became overnight an obligatory reference in political debates, ironic given his academically obscure style – it was a case of resorting to “empty” or “floating signifiers” with few connotations. This avoided possible ideological misgivings and made it possible to articulate a “chain of equivalents” linking the broadest possible subject. The objective, to use an expression in vogue, was “to occupy the middle ground.”

20 For the vision of the strategy of Podemos by its two main members, see Iglesias, Pablo: *Spain on the Edge*, in: *New Left Review* 93, 2015, 23–42 and Errejón, Íñigo / Mouffe, Chantal: *Podemos: In the Name of the People*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2016. For a panoramic view of Podemos, see Rendueles, César / Sola, Jorge: *The Rise of Podemos: Promises, Constraints, and Dilemmas*, in: García Agustín, Óscar / Briziarelli, Marco (eds.), *Podemos and the New Political Cycle*, London, Palgrave, 2018, 25–47.



ogised sectors.<sup>21</sup> We should point out that some militants of the left showed the same scepticism towards Podemos as they had towards 15M. Even those who participated in both processes often felt uncomfortable fighting against certain inherited inertias, an obstacle with which any attempt at innovation on the left must contend.

The frictions between Podemos and Izquierda Unida prevented an electoral alliance for the 2015 regional and general elections. In the latter, Izquierda Unida, driven by the generational takeover of the young Alberto Garzón, managed to survive with 3.7% of the vote. Negotiations to form a coalition paid off in the 2016 general elections (convened in the face of the impossibility of forming a government) under the “Unidos Podemos” brand, which currently survives as an electoral coalition and a parliamentary group.

The initial aspiration of Podemos to occupy the “middle ground” of the game board and obtain the support of the less ideologised voters came up against an unexpected factor: the irruption of Ciudadanos (Citizens). Ciudadanos had come into being in Catalonia in 2005 as a party opposed to Catalan nationalism, and decided to make the leap to national politics in 2015, with the support of certain elites who were looking for a “right wing Podemos,” as the president of Banco Sabadell stated.<sup>22</sup> Ciudadanos took advantage of the breach opened by Podemos to break into the political game board as a regenerationist and technocratic party, which represented the “new politics” without the radical shrillness of its competitor. Over time, this party has oriented its appeal to the right, in search of conservative voters disappointed with the PP.

The irruption of Podemos and Ciudadanos ended the bipartisan monopoly, but the old parties – PP and PSOE – have proved to be firmer than they appeared. The Popular Party has not undergone the fate of the Italian Christian Democrats after its own *Tangentopoli* corruption scandals: its roots in rural Spain and among the older population, as well as control of the workings of the State and the fear that it stirred against Podemos, allowed it to retain power until the motion of censure in May 2018. The Catalan crisis has spurred Ciudadanos to hoist a Spanish nationalism competing with the PP for the most conservative electorate, but among the power elites themselves there seems to be no unanimity regarding a possible changeover within the Spanish right. The PP has gone through a very hard internal battle over the succession of Mariano Rajoy, who resigned after being deposed as president of the government. It remains to be seen what electoral price the party will pay for this situation, which will depend largely on the ability of its leaders to maintain internal cohesion. Its new leader, elected in July

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21 The crudest episode of these frictions were the controversial statements of Pablo Iglesias in the summer of 2015: “I do not want spoilsport politicians, who in 25 years have been unable to do anything. I do not want the political leaders of Izquierda Unida, and I worked for them, who are unable to read the political situation of the country, to come to us (...) Stay in your place. You can sing the International, have your red stars (...) that also moves me and I like it, but I do not want to do politics with that.” *Público*, 24 June 2015.

22 Lorenzo, Miguel: Josep Olliu proposes ‘una especie de Podemos de derechas’, in: *El Periódico*, 25 June 2014, [www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20140625/josep-oliu-propone-crear-una-especie-de-podemos-de-derechas-3329695](http://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20140625/josep-oliu-propone-crear-una-especie-de-podemos-de-derechas-3329695) (15.11.2018).

2018, is the young Pablo Casado, who managed to impose himself over the candidate closest to Rajoy with a rhetoric that broke with moderation and tested the waters in the direction of the alt-right: criticism of “gender ideology”, vindication of conservative values and rejection of foreign immigration.

The PSOE also failed to follow the steps of the Greek PASOK after its 2010 shift towards austerity. Its reaction to the emergence of Podemos oscillated between disdain and bewilderment: for the first time it feared that it could be ousted from its hegemonic position in the electoral space of the left, by a party that explicitly appealed to the vote of the “socialist at heart”. From then on, it began a renewal process, controlled with an iron fist by the apparatus, placing an unknown Pedro Sánchez at the head of the party. In the 2015 and 2016 elections, PSOE managed to retain a base of 20% and avoided being overtaken by Podemos. Pedro Sánchez was not able to form a progressive government, but he also did not want to facilitate the PP government. That unleashed a serious internal crisis that culminated with the dismissal of Pedro Sánchez by the same apparatus that had helped him up. After being deposed, Sanchez resigned as member of parliament to avoid having to vote for Rajoy and started a campaign that culminated with his surprising victory in the May 2017 primaries, brandishing a leftist rhetoric against the representative of the apparatus, Susana Díaz. In the months that followed, that rhetoric faded and, with it, the popularity of Sánchez. His story took a new unexpected turn in May 2018: the triumph of the motion of censure on Mariano Rajoy made him president of the Government, with the support of Podemos and the nationalists. It is too early to know what will happen now. It remains to be seen if PSOE will be able to recover the lost vote among the younger generations, or if the new executive’s image of modernity will be sufficient to deal with the political-economic problems that lie ahead.

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The panorama that appeared after the elections of 2015 and 2016 is a four-party system, structured by two persistent axes: ideology and generation. The rhetoric, present both in 15M and in Podemos, maintaining that the “left / right divide” had been overcome, proved to be exaggerated, if not false. In fact, the percentage of people who self-identify as at the centre or avoid declaring themselves on the right or left has remained surprisingly stable in recent decades.<sup>23</sup> However, it would be incorrect to say that the “transversal” rhetoric was useless: it probably served to shake the framework of the political debate and persuade many left wing voters, for whom appeals based on ideological identity did not prove credible in view of the fact that words often diverge from facts.

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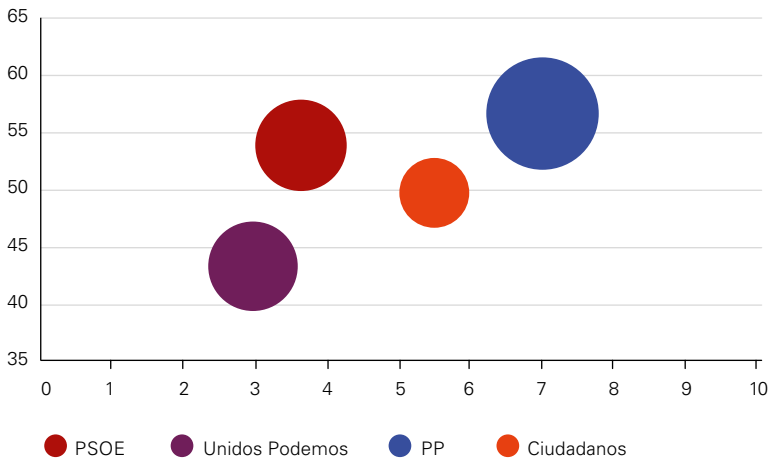
23 The percentage of the former grew in the nineties from 25 to 30%, and the latter decreased from 27% in the eighties to 22% at present, according to the data of the Centre for Sociological Research.

## ELECTION RESULTS FOR THE 2014–2016 CYCLE

ELECTIONS	EUROPEAN 05.2014	REGIONAL 05.2015	LOCAL 05.2015	GENERAL 12.2015	GENERAL 07.2015
PP	26.0	31.0	27.5	28.7	33.0
PSOE	23.0	25.1	16.6	22.0	22.7
Podemos	8.0	13.9	22.2	20.7	21.1
Ciudadanos	3.2	10.2	11.3	13.9	13.1
IU	10.0	4.4	8.8	3.7	---

**Sources and notes:** Ministry of the Interior and *El País*. The regional elections do not include four regions (Catalonia, Basque Country, Galicia, and Andalusia). The municipal elections only include the results of the ten largest cities in Spain. In the municipal elections of May 2015, Podemos and Izquierda Unida ran as part of citizen platforms in many places, and in the June 2016 general elections both parties formed the “Unidos Podemos” coalition.

## POLITICAL MAP ACCORDING TO THE AGE AND IDEOLOGY OF THE VOTERS



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**Sources and notes:** CIS, 2016 Post-electoral Survey. The vertical axis represents the average age of the voters and the horizontal axis the average of their ideological self-placement (on a left-right scale from 0 to 10); the size of the circles represents the size of each party's support. The average ideology of Ciudadanos voters, as well as the social perception of the party's ideology, has shifted to the right since then.

To complete the map, we must include the so-called “confluences.”<sup>24</sup> The alliance at state level between Podemos and Izquierda Unida under the umbrella of “Unidos Podemos” had its precedents in the regional confluences that appeared in Galicia (En Marea), Catalonia (En Comú) or Valencia (Compromís-Podemos). The main factor that favoured these alliances was that in those places there were political actors whose implementation and popularity forced Podemos to count on them instead of running in the elections alone. The importance that these confluences have acquired is threefold: they offer forms of aggregation that are more flexible and inclusive, they have obtained the best results in the successive elections, and they have introduced a greater internal plurality in the constellation of the forces of change. The future of the left in Spain will depend largely on how these confluences can evolve and replicate.

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24 We exclude from the analysis the nationalist parties of the left or centre-left, such as the Galician Nationalist Bloc (Galicia), Chunta Aragonesista (Aragón), Bildu (Euskadi) or the Popular Unity Candidacies (Catalonia).



# THE PARTIES AND THEIR DEMOCRATISATION



A recurring motif among the new generations was disaffection with regard to the parties, as well as commitment to the more horizontal forms of participation typical of social movements. This divorce was aggravated by the absence of strong ideological loyalties like those enjoyed by the old socialist and communist parties, and the increased fluidity of forms of socio-political commitment. The alternatives discussed in the first decade of the century, both outside and within the parties, revolved around “participatory democracy”: it was a case of expanding forms of direct participation and guaranteeing greater levels of control and transparency. One of the proposals that enjoyed greater popularity in the heat of 15M was the use of primaries and open lists.

Podemos co-opted this feeling, which was also increasing within Izquierda Unida, and presented itself not as a party, but as “a participatory method open to all citizens.” Thanks to the organisational innovations that it brought with it, Podemos represents an excellent laboratory to analyse the possibilities and limitations of the new organisational models. The use of direct participation from its very beginning<sup>25</sup> fuelled the illusion of a movement-party that, supported by new technologies, would be able to overcome the perennial problems afflicting the parties. However, this illusion has not been matched by reality.

The organisational model Podemos adopted in its first congress (Vistalegre I, held in fall 2014) was graphically described by its promoters as an “electoral war machine” aimed at successfully facing the coming elections. With the choice of that model, the democratic and pluralistic development of the basic structures of the organisation were subordinated to its efficacy in the “Blitzkrieg” that was to be fought in the electoral field in the following months.

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The structure of the new party was, in part, conventional: it was organised by territorial levels (local, regional and state) with a committee (called “citizen council”) and a secretary general at each level. But it also included four innovations. First, the mechanisms of the primaries were maintained when choosing both internal positions and electoral candidacies, as well as consultations for some key decisions. Second, these primaries were “open” to anyone registering on the Internet, there were no actual affiliates paying a fee. Third, the lists that were opened in the primaries, in the absence of any proportional weighting mechanism, were translated into a majority method in which the winner took everything.<sup>26</sup> Fourth, the congresses were also open to electronic voting on documents by all those “registered” and there was no possibility of face-to-face debate to partially amend them and achieve synthesis in the event of disagreements.

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25 In 2014, Pablo Iglesias made his candidacy conditional on gaining 50,000 electronic support endorsements, which he got in 24 hours; soon after, Podemos chose his list for the European elections in primaries open to all citizens and offered electronic means for popular participation in drawing up the program. *De facto*, how Podemos operated during its first months of life was characterised by the Leninist centralism of a small campaign team with a carefully designed strategy, and that was part of its initial success.

26 These were single candidate votes (with the possibility of presenting lists to guide the vote) with the same number of votes as positions to be elected, and without weighting according to the order candidates occupied in the voters list. This was modified later with a more proportional method, but which retained a majority bias that was detrimental to critical minorities.

The result of this model was ambivalent. The direct election resulted in massive participation in the electoral processes of Podemos and made it appear as a more democratic party. However, it weakened the organic links (between the party base, its cadres and public representatives), granted enormous power to the leaders – who maintained *de facto* control over the lists – and favoured a functioning more based on imposition than deliberation. In other words, the model had a marked plebiscitary character.

The choice of this model can be better understood in the light of two circumstances. The first is a theoretical reflection about the “democratic elitism” of the left. The asymmetry between the intense activism of full-time militant groups and the lesser or intermittent participation of other people (in this case, many supporters of Podemos) posed an uncomfortable dilemma: privileging the influence of the former over the preferences of the latter could lead to a “democratic elitism,” which aims to “convert all citizens into permanent activists and [privileges] minority militancy as a source of sovereign decisions.”<sup>27</sup> In this way, a social majority deprived of the resources available to activists (time, skills, interest, etc.) could be marginalised from the political life of the new organisation. The political opening that 15M and then Podemos had brought, and that had encouraged many people to enter political participation, could be narrowed. It is a crucial debate, but one whose solution is still pending. In this case, it seems that the power of the most active militants of Podemos was not actually transferred to a broader layer of sympathisers, but rather concentrated in the hands of party leaders.

The second circumstance was eminently practical. Podemos had to face a devilish scenario in its first two years of life: running for local, regional and national elections with no consolidated organisational structures or experienced political cadres, with the danger that a drift to the left would ruin their “transversal” rhetoric, and a hostile media environment that took advantage of any excuse to attack them. As Íñigo Errejón summed up, “we have to run and tie our laces at the same time.” In this sense, some defended the hierarchical and centralised “hyperleadership” of the “electoral war machine” as a temporary price to pay in order to take advantage of the window of opportunity that was opened with that electoral cycle. In his defence of this model, Pablo Iglesias affirmed, “the sky is taken by assault, not by consensus.” The problem is that, when the electoral race ended and it was necessary to return to the “war of positions” the politico-organisational dynamics that had been set in motion were not easy to reverse. When it was time to review them, at the second Podemos congress (Vistalegre II, held in February 2017), their perverse effects were already visible, but insufficient changes were introduced to remedy them.

The medium-term effects of this “warlike” model of organisation have been quite pernicious. In the absence of checks and balances and a more fraternal political culture, any dissent becomes an internal crisis. Caricatures and accusations overshadow political deliberation,

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27 Alba Rico, Santiago: El lío de Podemos y los tres elitismos, in: Cuartopoder, 4 October 2014, [www.cuartopoder.es/ideas/opinion/2014/10/04/el-lio-de-podemos-y-los-tres-elitismos/6325](http://www.cuartopoder.es/ideas/opinion/2014/10/04/el-lio-de-podemos-y-los-tres-elitismos/6325) (15.11.2018).

leading to a serious deterioration in the climate of the organisation in its daily militancy. The effective distribution of internal power has not prevented the effects of the “iron law of the oligarchy”, without having brought the advantages of efficiency that initially justified the model. Along the way, the internal dynamics of Podemos have reproduced the worst sectarianism of the left.

At this point, it may be opportune to provide a map of the main factions or currents of the left. Within Podemos, there was soon a division between the official sector – which for mere expository convenience we can call “populist” – headed by Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón, and the “grass-roots” sector, promoted by the Anti-Capitalist Left. The first proposed a more “Machiavellian” strategy of assault on institutions with strong leadership and sensationalist communication strategies, while the second claimed horizontality and close connection with social movements as a driver of change. Shortly afterwards, the official sector was divided into “Errejonists” and “Pabloists”. Although the confrontation was somewhat overstated and the differences often exaggerated in debates, it can be said that the former wished to strengthen the original “populist” rhetoric while the latter reproduced a rhetoric with more leftist references. We can trace their differences in the slogans to which they both resorted to characterise their disagreements: the “Errejonists” urged “seducing those who were missing,” emphasising the original commitment to transversality, even though it involved more moderate language or agreements with other progressive forces. On the other hand, the “Pabloists” called for “showing teeth” to the powerful to underline the outsider and incorruptible character of Podemos, even though it was not always profitable in the short term or could scare off more moderate sectors. The organisational model has exacerbated the clashes between these three sectors, dwarfing the traditional disputes of Izquierda Unida. Meanwhile, in this last party, the main tension has revolved around the commitment to a greater confluence with Podemos and the reaffirmation of the identity of Izquierda Unida as an independent organisation.

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Perhaps the best example of the unforeseen consequences of the Podemos organisational model are the primaries. 15M reclaimed primary elections and the new party raised them as a flag. Their democratising potential seemed certain: not only did they involve militants and sympathisers in decision-making, but they could reinforce the accountability and pluralism of organisations. However, the experience of Podemos seems to align with the transformation, in a different sense, of other parties in recent decades: the emptying of the party structure, facilitated by the use of open primaries, can concentrate power in the leadership of the party under a veneer of democracy. The possibility of voting from a smartphone does not imply that you have real decision-making power.<sup>28</sup>

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28 Katz, Richard S.: The Problem of Candidate Selection and Models of Party Democracy, *Party Politics* 7/3, 2001, 277–296. Scarrow, Susan E.: Parties and the Expansion of Direct Democracy: Who Benefits?, in: *Party Politics* 5/3, 1999, 341–362. Scarrow, Susan E. / Webb, Paul / Farrell, David M.: From Social Integration to Electoral Contestation. The Changing Distribution of Power within Political Parties, in: Dalton, Russell J. / Wattenberg, Martin P. (eds.), *Parties without partisans political change in advanced industrial democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, 129–153.

The problem is that the balance sheet is not very promising from the point of view of organisational efficiency either. The primaries have turned into authentic, and sometimes dirty, electoral campaigns, which consume a major part of the militants' energy and deepen internal rivalries. This exposes Podemos to constant erosion. All this does not mean rejecting the primaries – nobody has dared to suggest this – but their advantages are debatable and depend to a large extent on the organisational contexts in which they are applied and the concrete plans that surround them. It also suggests consideration of other mechanisms that could break both the monopoly of the ruling elites and the dynamics of competition between them, as well as the use of the draw to select some positions (for example, members of guarantee commissions), in order to ensure their independence.<sup>29</sup>

The experience of Podemos offers relevant lessons for the democratisation projects of political organisations. For the time being, we must be cautious of the unforeseen negative effects of the forms that oppose the “bureaucracy” of the old parties. In other words, we may not necessarily assume that the innovations complacently labelled the “new politics” are completely beneficial. In particular, there is a real danger that democratic rhetoric based on “participation” obscures the real distribution of power in organisations. This rhetoric often ignores the fact that democracy also requires favourable conditions for deliberation based on reasoning, a normative-institutional environment that ensures the proper functioning of organisations, and the effective inclusion of the greatest possible number of people (especially people of humbler origin who usually lack the social and cultural capital to break into political practice). In the absence of these conditions, it is likely that formal participation mechanisms will only be the façade of the competition between ruling elites and end up reinforcing the hollowing out of democracy.

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29 The idea of using the draw to choose the members of some party organs was proposed several times during these years, but with very little success so far. See Moreno Pestaña, José Luís: El sorteo y la recepción del populismo en Podemos, in: *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 21, 2017, 311–328 and Costa, Jorge: Resistencias a la introducción del sorteo entre el asamblearismo y la institucionalización: el caso de Podemos en Cádiz, in: *Daimon* 72, 2017, 221–237.

# THE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS



In debates within the Spanish left, particularly Podemos, there has been frequent appeal to social movements as the keystone of political strategy. For some, the impulse for political change came from the “grass-roots” dynamic of 15M, so it was key to feed that energy and let it guide the strategy of the political forces. For others, on the contrary, 15M had abandoned the “classic” repertoires of social movements, particularly in its rhetoric, and had achieved much greater support because of this. Even so, it had run into strategic and organisational obstacles that required a different strategy, adapted to the new political phase, to overcome them.

To assess this discussion in its proper measure – which is parallel to the one that occurred concerning the internal organisation of Podemos – we must take into account the real situation of social movements. This is where we find ourselves with a paradox unique to Spain: it is a country with very high levels of political mobilisation and with very low levels of membership of social organisation.<sup>30</sup> Both are a lasting feature of Spanish society, whose origins go back to the legacy of the Franco regime and the peculiarities of the Transition to Democracy – in particular, institutions that are not very open to, and offer few channels for, citizen demands.<sup>31</sup> The tension between these two processes with such different rhythms, however, explains much of the uniqueness and limits of left-wing alternatives. We could say that Spain is a highly politically mobilised country with relatively weak social movements.<sup>32</sup>

The second part of that statement may be controversial and depends on how we define “social movements”<sup>33</sup> and which indicators we choose to measure their strength. But beyond the semantic or methodological disagreements, what is really relevant may be that mobilisation in a specific moment does not crystallise into stable and lasting forms of organisation, which prevents extended citizen participation over time and the creation of networks beyond activist nuclei.

15M itself, without a doubt the most successful case of political-social mobilisation, stumbled upon this paradox: its expressive success when it came to articulating discontent and gathering the support of the social majority contrasted with its inability to create stable organisational forms that offered channels of participation for those who filled the squares. The attempts to preserve, revitalise or replicate the insurrectional energy of 15M have failed

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30 Morales, Laura / Geurts, Peter: Associational Involvement, in: van Deth, J.W. / Montero, J.R. / Westholm, A. (eds.), *Citizenship and involvement in European Democracies: A Comparative Analysis*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2007, 135–157. Fishman, Robert M.: *Democracy's voices: social ties and the quality of public life in Spain*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004.

31 Fishman, Robert: On the Significance of Public Protest in Spanish Democracy, in: Jordana, Jacint / Navarro, Vicenç / Pallarés, Francesc / Requejo, Ferran (eds.), *Democràcia, Política i Societat, Homenatge a Rosa Virós*, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2012, 351–366.

32 Aguilar, Suana / Romanos, Eduardo: Is Spain still different? Social Movements Research in a Belated Western European Democracy, in: Fillieule, Olivier / Accornero, Guya (eds.), *Social Movement Studies in Europe. The State of the Art*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2016, 338–355.

33 It is a category imported from the academy whose definition has never been agreed upon and which may be more confusing than clarifying. See, for example, the classic article by Diani, Mario: The concept of social movement, in: *The Sociological Review* 40/1, 1992, 1–25. and a more recent reflection Diani, Mario: Revisando el concepto de movimiento social, in: *Encrucijadas* 9, 2015, 1–15.

because, as has been proven in recent years, it is an explosive and intermittent mobilisation model that reappears with some regularity but always in a relatively fleeting manner. The example of the “tides” in defence of public services is also instructive. They took advantage of the momentum of 15M to ride over previous mobilisations of a traditional nature – led by trade unions and professional associations – and to overwhelm them. They managed to create a diffuse but vigorous network, capable, once again, of building broad solidarities with the users of public services and, in general, citizenship. However, this enormous political energy achieved few of its concrete demands and did not lead to a lasting consolidation on the organisational level – the unions, in fact, were not very permeable to the “tides,” whose traces are scarce today.

However, it is also true that the explosive nature of social mobilisation has shown possibilities for political intervention that the left’s agenda did not contemplate and that surely would never have been explored in a more controlled political environment. The demonstrations in the Gamonal neighbourhood of 2014 or, more recently, the resistance in Murcia to the construction of train tracks that divide the city have been examples of high intensity movements of neighbourhood mobilisation, unheard of for decades (the neighbourhood movement, still very active at the beginning of the eighties, suffered an important decline later). Similarly, at the beginning of 2018, a series of demonstrations that began in defence of the public pension system led by a group that the left considered practically impervious to its messages.<sup>34</sup>

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Nevertheless, the most striking example of the capacity of explosive social mobilisation to uncover opportunities for unexpected politicisation has been the cycle of feminist protests that culminated in the strike of 8 March 2018. In Spain, the values associated with gender egalitarianism had been growing gradually for decades, especially in terms of public and employment space and sexual freedom. In the same way, the mobilisations against violence against women followed a growing pattern for some time. However, feminism had a low capacity for social mobilisation and generated rejection in broad social sectors. Undoubtedly the most spectacular expression of this situation was the conflict around the feminism committee of the 15M Madrid camp, which placed a banner with the slogan “The revolution will be feminist or it will not be” that was ripped off, to the applause of the assembly. This situation began to change in 2014, with protests against the abortion law that the PP intended to approve. Four years later, feminism has managed, like 15M at the time, to change the common sense of the country and has a strong capacity to attract, especially young women, although it still lacks a consolidated organisational structure.<sup>35</sup>

For that reason, it is possible that other innovative movements that currently lack pulling power could become powerful protest engines in the near future. Mobilisations for housing

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34 As seen in graph p. 21, the older population is the main electoral bastion of traditional parties, especially the PP.

35 Campillo, Inés: ‘If we stop, the world stops.’ The 2018 Feminist Strike in Spain, *Social Movements Studies* (in print).



could reappear with the struggle of the tenants' unions or the neighbourhood movements against tourism overrunning the cities, the growing sensitivity to animal rights among the youth could acquire a majority dimension, or the ecological movement could resurface through new expressions.

However, this should not prevent us from recognising two main limitations: the biases in the composition of social movements<sup>36</sup> and their lack of organisation. As for the first, the social mobilisation of 15M and its ramifications has counted primarily on a certain social group: young middle class people<sup>37</sup> with a university education whose expectations of social reproduction had been frustrated and who experienced more intensely the failed promise of meritocratic ideology. On the contrary, working-class youth and migrant population were notably under-represented both in the dynamics of the mobilisations, and in the rhetorics and images they projected.<sup>38</sup> The social gap characterising the change bloc was generational, but the decisive voice of the new generation had a marked class bias. Neither the "tides" nor Podemos nor municipalism nor feminism have managed to break this dynamic and involve politically those at the bottom, who suffer the material effects of the crisis more intensely.

Regarding the second limitation, as we have said, the intensity of the mobilisations has not been matched by political-institutional change or organisational articulation. The mobilisations have been very powerful expressive mechanisms and relatively successful in terms of introducing transformations in subjectivity and common sense, but they have proved incapable of overcoming their own horizon of meaning. The processes of political demand fail to take concrete form in stable organisations to give continuity to the commitment of the people and enhance their effectiveness.

One of the few exceptions to this double rule is the anti-eviction movement. The PAH and other organisations have managed to put together a network of stable assemblies with a strong capacity for intervention at different levels: from timely mobilisation to stop evictions, to dialogue with public agencies and mediation with financial institutions, through the organi-

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36 Of course, this is not a peculiar feature of the Spanish case, but a general process well documented by social research. See, for example, Caínzos, Miguel / Voces, Carmen: *Class Inequalities in Political Participation and the 'Death of Class' Debate*, in: *International Sociology* 25/3, 2010, 383–418.

37 The term "middle class" sometimes arouses suspicion on the left, because it is understood as a category that simply reflects the aspirational identity of a part of the working class. However, this concept serves to designate the "objective" position of those persons (most of them salaried) who, depending on the degree of qualification and authority or autonomy they enjoy in the production process, have different opportunities and interests than those of the working class. They also have greater resources in terms of cultural and social capital, largely transmitted through family (see, for example, Wright, Erik Olin: *Class counts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000 or Bourdieu, Pierre: *The Forms of Capital*, in: Biggart, Nicole W. (ed.), *Readings in Economic Sociology*, New Jersey, Wiley-Blackwell, 2008). This is compatible with a part of the middle class having suffered a process of downward mobility, as has happened in Spain, but even in that case, their situation differs "objectively" from that of the working class, due to their greater resources, such as a buffer of family money, or academic qualifications. To put it simply, there is a middle class "precarial" and a working class one, and while one of the political objectives must be to create a broad social bloc including both, to ignore their differences can be counterproductive.

38 Rodríguez, Emmanuel: *La política en el ocaso de la clase media. El ciclo 15M-Podemos*, Madrid, *Traficantes de Sueños*, 2017. Moreno Pestaña, José Luis: *Democracia, movimientos sociales y participación popular: Lógicas democráticas y lógicas de distinción en las asambleas del 15M*, in: Escalera, Javier / Coca, Agustín (eds.), *Movimientos sociales, participación y ciudadanía en Andalucía*, 2013, 263–301.

sation of self-help mechanisms (legal advice and occupations to rehouse the evicted). All this has allowed it to include and give prominence to people of lower social extraction and/or the migrant population (especially Latin American). One of the possible explanations for this exceptionality of the movement to combat evictions is the weight of mutual support in this project compared with others more based on indignation, although it is true that other similar initiatives around food banks have not had as much success.

The experience of the PAH has been interpreted as an example of “social unionism” and attempts have been made to replicate it in other fields, until now without the same success. Along with the structural factors of the organisational weakness of the social movements that we have pointed out above – an anaemic civil society and an impermeable political system, the legacy of the Franco regime – we should highlight other causes more tied to specific current considerations. The irruption of Podemos and municipalist platforms in the institutions have emptied the social movements of cadres, repeating a process that had already occurred with the rise of the PSOE in the eighties. In this sense, it is not coincidental that the reactivation of the mobilisation cycle in 2018 has coincided with a certain disenchantment with institutional possibilities to promote change – and, in particular, with the growth of Podemos. This reactivation is crucial to overcome the *impasse* in the political cycle and to mobilise people disenchanted with the “new politics.” But in view of these imitations, entrusting all political strategy to the “dynamics of movements” is to some extent wishful thinking.

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ATENCIÓN

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Another feature of the current political cycle is the elusive role of the labour movement. The echo of 15M stopped at the doors of the workplace; unions have hesitated to join the wave of mobilisation, and political rhetorics have avoided references to class. Over time, there has been a critical reflection on these absences – which has sometimes been used as a weapon in factional struggles, especially in Podemos – but until now, this reflection has not led to a deep debate nor to substantive proposals.

In order to understand the absence of labour issues in the practices of the political left, we must look at the labour market. Spain has been characterised by levels of unemployment and precariousness that both in good times and times of crisis, are double the European average.<sup>39</sup> In turn, unions enjoy institutional recognition (collective bargaining covers 80% of workers), but lack a firm base (the level of affiliation is around 15%), which sometimes prevents the actual agreements from becoming effective. This weakness is especially serious in the small business and service sector, which is the basis of the Spanish economy. As mentioned above, from the second half of the nineties, and after the defeat in their challenge to the socialist governments, the unions adopted a position favourable to social peace, partly adjusting their expectations to their leverage, which made them seem conniving or permissive of the excesses of the financial-real estate bubble of the beginning of the century.

This situation has taken its toll in terms of social prestige, both on the left and on the right. A milestone in this sense was the pension reform pact of February 2011, which largely dismissed them as catalysts for the malaise that would erupt a few months later with 15M. Subsequently, unions have supported – sometimes with determination, other times very timidly– many of the social mobilisations, although they did not take the lead in conflicts such as the tides, and in others – like the fight against evictions – they refrained from taking action, turning their back on a union tradition that offered inspiring precedents.<sup>40</sup>

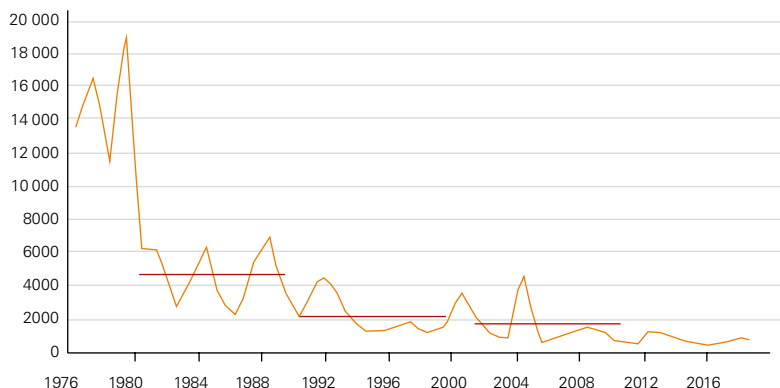
With regard to labour unrest, it suffered a slight setback with ups and downs after the outbreak of the crisis, but during 2018 it has grown suddenly (the incidence of strikes of the first three months is the same as that of the whole previous year). It is true that there have been a series of workers' struggles in the highly precarious sectors characteristic of the new economy – hotel cleaning staff (mostly migrants), Amazon deliverers or Deliveroo riders – as well as other traditional ones, such as stevedores or Coca-Cola employees. However, we must be cautious about the idea that this represents a re-politicisation wave of the world of labour. The current strike levels pale before eighties figures.

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39 Sola, Jorge / Campillo, Inés: La precarización en su contexto: desarrollo y crisis del régimen de empleo en España, in: Papeles de relaciones ecosociales y cambio global 140, 2018, 51–63.

40 For example, the CCOO "socio-political movement during the Franco regime or, further back, the CNT tenants strikes during the Second Republic.

## LABOUR CONFLICT (DAYS NOT WORKED) IN SPAIN (1976–2017)



**Source and notes:** Ministry of Labour. The vertical axis shows the hours not worked in thousands. The horizontal lines show the average of each decade. From 1982 to 1985, data from Catalonia were not collected, and from 1986 to 1989, data from the Basque Country were not collected. The general strikes of 1988, 1992, 1994, 2001, 2010 and 2012 are not included. The data for 2018 corresponds only to the first quarter, so it is likely to end up being much higher than the previous year.

An important side effect of this lack of prominence has been the reinforcement of the class biases of this political cycle. One of the main impacts of the 2008 crisis in Spain has been the increase in social inequality. The rhetoric, omnipresent in the early years, that “the middle class had paid for the crisis” contrasted with the objective reality that the greatest income losses were concentrated in the poorest sectors of the population (the three lowest deciles), those who have suffered most from the ravages of unemployment. The forces of change have tried to exploit this misapprehension politically by denouncing, for example, the “exile” abroad of many young people with master’s degrees and language skills. However, although it is a relevant phenomenon, it applies only to a minority (only one third of young Spaniards go to university, and one in eight of these does graduate studies), and represents only part of emigration abroad. In this way, the problems and images of the popular classes have been eclipsed in the rhetorics of the left by the hegemony of the middle class to which we referred earlier. The methods by which political cadres are recruited have contributed to this: union militancy was the route by which many workers previously accessed political activism or institutional representation; by contrast, the networks built on university activism have been the main seedbed of cadres in the forces of change.

An additional problem is that trade unionism has not lived its particular 15M. The two big unions have renewed their leadership (in the case of CCOO, with the election of a secretary who no longer belongs to the generation of the Transition), but their structures are anchored in patterns of a bygone era. In these circumstances, the need to forge forms of union intervention in post-Fordist work environments remains a pending task. To deal with it successfully it would be necessary for the left to give more importance to this matter.





# MUNICIPALISM AND THE "CITIES OF CHANGE"





So-called “municipalism” has been the space of confluence par excellence. These electoral platforms have merged the two “souls” of the new left – the “populist” and the “grass-roots” – and the renewed Izquierda Unida, as well as other activists and many citizens without any specific affiliation. In the municipal elections of 2015, the municipalist candidacies won the mayoral offices of Madrid, Barcelona, and Zaragoza, among other cities. Regardless of how we regard the way in which these platforms were drawn up and managed, it is indisputable that they represent the main electoral milestone of the opposing forces coming from 15M. Above all, the “cities of change” teach a very important political lesson: they have shown that leftist governments outside bipartisanship are capable of governing the main cities of Spain effectively and responsibly even in times of recession.

The process of forming the municipalist [electoral] platforms was complex, diverse and conflictual.<sup>41</sup> Initially promoted by groups of activists – related variously to different organisations – the development of these platforms was favoured by the decision of Podemos not to run for the municipal elections of 2015 under its own name. The new party lacked the organisational infrastructure necessary to create thousands of reliable candidacies throughout Spain and there was a real possibility that these would be used as a springboard by careerists. This led to the emergence of candidates with more flexible and inclusive forms of association, whose “citizen” image distanced them from distrust toward political parties.

While the organisational models of these platforms have been innovative, they have not been able to leave behind certain problems. The comparison between the cases of Madrid and Barcelona can be instructive. In Barcelona, the initiative came from a group headed by Ada Colau – ex PAH spokesperson – and there was a negotiation about its leadership with the different currents of the Barcelona left, including the old ICV-EUiA<sup>42</sup> and the new Podem. The result of that negotiation was a candidacy that obtained 25% of votes in the 2015 elections and has ruled with a minority, but retained remarkable internal cohesion. In Madrid, the initiative came from groups of activists standing on the Ganemos platform, which after tough negotiation, reached an agreement with Podemos under the Ahora Madrid brand. Open and proportional primaries were held to select the candidate, so that the three candidates that competed – the “official” Podemos one, led by veteran judge Manuela Carmena, the “grass-roots” and Izquierda Unida ones – were weighted in proportion to their votes. In the elections, 32% of the votes put Carmena in the mayor’s office with the support of the PSOE, but the lack of cohesion of the government team, fuelled by the mayor’s individualistic style of leadership and the lack of understanding with critical sectors, has been a source of recurrent friction.

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41 In cities like Murcia and Valladolid, two different municipalist platforms ran in the elections.

42 ICV-EUIA is the referent of Izquierda Unida in Catalonia.

The comparison between the cases of Madrid and Barcelona suggests that there may be a tension between the procedure for deciding candidacies<sup>43</sup> and the cohesion of the resulting teams, especially when they are in government, although it is true that the experience of other cities shows that there are other factors at play. One of them, common to a greater or lesser extent to all cases, is that these platforms were not driven by a “municipalist” movement proper. In other words, there was not a strong neighbourhood movement with popular roots in the neighbourhoods from which these candidacies arose; they were driven rather by groups of militants from the small worlds of local activist politics (territorially concentrated in city centres). It is true that the platforms attracted people from outside those environments (like Carmena herself in Madrid) and mobilised many people in the electoral campaign. But here as well, we should not confuse mobilisation with movement.

The experience of the “ayuntamientos del cambio” [“local councils for change”] has been positive. To begin with, they have imposed a more appropriate and closer management style that contrasts with the clientelist corruption and speculative waste of previous administrations. In the area of urban mobility and energy transition, pedestrianisation and restrictions have reduced the use of cars and favoured public transport and bicycles, and priority has been given to the use of green energy. Likewise, social economy and co-operativism have received a strong boost, to the detriment of the large companies that monopolised public contracting. Despite the ceiling of expenditure imposed by the central government, there has been a notable increase in social spending, reflected in the development of public services and urban facilities (from care for the dependent to nursery schools). Some services privatised by previous local governments have also been brought back under local authority control and new public companies have been created (such as Barcelona Energía). Lastly, a decisive transversal policy of gender equality has been adopted. All this work has received international recognition.<sup>44</sup> What is clear, however, is that the “ayuntamientos del cambio” bear little resemblance to the “municipal soviets” against which the more conservative press warned – and of which some disappointed activists perhaps dreamed.

These successes should not hide some limitations or obstacles that the city councils have encountered, generating certain internal conflicts. It is important to analyse these in order to avoid them. First, and following an international trend, these local governments are often seen as the great hope of progressive reawakening of politics in the face of state political institutions that have lost legitimacy. However, the “ayuntamientos del cambio” (progressive local councils) have encountered the straitjacket of these institutions, aggravated in Spain by the “cap on spending” imposed by central government to meet the demands of the European

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43 According to whether it is based on a negotiation or on primaries and, in the latter case, on the extent to which it adopted proportional representation.

44 In the case of Madrid, for example, with two UN prizes (to the participation platform #DecideMadrid and the Territorial Rebalancing Fund for distributing resources), as well as European Union financing of an important social economy project (the MARES).

Union, and the lack of powers to resolve large-scale problems whose solution lies with the of the States. An important example is housing. The re-emergence of property speculation, now focused on renting and offering tourist flats (through Airbnb), has had an immense impact on many Spanish cities and is the result of international financial flows impossible to control from the local level. In turn, attempts to curb the impact of urban tourism on the life of large cities are faced with the structure of the Spanish economy-tourism represents 16% of Spanish GDP and the boom of this sector is what has cushioned the impact of the economic crisis. The efforts that progressive local councils are making, although important, may not be sufficient in this context.

Secondly, there are limitations derived from the institutional dynamics of the city councils themselves as “State apparatuses,” to use the Marxist jargon. The new mayors and councillors, usually not familiar with the institutions, have faced the need to manage complex bureaucratic machines with their own inertia, as well as personnel not always well disposed to the changes, which presented great difficulties for compliance with the electoral programmes. One example has been the difficulty in reversing privatisation processes and urban interventions initiated by previous conservative governments. Another has been the constant legal challenges to the most ambitious measures. But even in the case of less conflictual initiatives, such as participatory budgets, the administrative inertia of the municipalities has diminished their transformative potential.

In the third place, the absence of a strong organisational anchoring in the neighbourhoods of the cities, related to the continuous decline of the neighbourhood movement since its seventies heyday, has meant another limitation to municipal initiatives and, in some cases, has magnified the rivalries between its constituent groups. The lack of broad social support for the construction of a municipal political alternative has had two consequences for progressive local councils: they have lacked the organisational structures to implement and defend ambitious and risky transformative policies, and they have not been held accountable to them. They had to govern with one eye on the press, extremely hostile to newcomers, and another on the polls, downplaying measures – related, for example, to traffic control or tourist rents – that might be unpopular among some of their voters, while receiving somewhat uncomradely criticism from some activist sectors.



# THE CATALAN CRISIS

One of the ramifications of the political crisis has been the so-called Catalan *procés* (process). The territorial conflict in Spain, linked to an incomplete process of nation-building, has deep roots. The Second Republic's attempts to solve it were truncated with the Civil War, and the Franco dictatorship centralised the political system and repressed cultural expressions that did not fit with an authoritarian Spanish nationalism (among them, the use of the Basque, Catalan, or Galician languages). The appropriation of the idea of "Spain" by the right made the left turn its back on many national symbols, while at the same time viewing Basque and Catalan nationalisms sympathetically.

With the Transition to Democracy, the political system was decentralised with a pseudo-federal system, which transferred many competences – such as education and health – to the "autonomous communities" but maintained a centralisation of sovereignty, and abandoned any right to self-determination of its parts. The political game that was established then consisted of a tug of war between the central governments and the Basque and Catalan nationalist parties (which formerly held power in the autonomous governments and which were sometimes necessary to support the central government). This, together with the background noise of the political violence of ETA (definitively dissolved in May 2018) and the authoritarian responses of the State, contributed for several decades to the fact that territorial conflict displaced social or class conflict.

In the last decade, the focus of tension has shifted from Euskadi to Catalonia. There, dissatisfaction with the economic-political crisis has translated into demands for independence from the Spanish State, and for a referendum to exercise the "right to decide." Support for independence has grown from 15% in 2006 to around 45% today.<sup>45</sup> In a way, the rise of independence movements can be interpreted as an expression of the crisis of the 78 regime. In Catalonia, the "populist moment" has been articulated around the representation of a transverse us (the Catalan "people") against an adversary (the State or Spain) on which it lays the blame for the evils caused or revealed by the crisis. The independence movement is complex and ambivalent in its ideological composition. It brings together both progressive or directly anti-capitalist sectors, such as the CUP – which, as in Scotland, justify independence in pursuit of greater social justice, and conservative or neoliberal sectors that repeat a rhetoric similar to that of the Italian Lega Nord (*Espanya ens roba* – Spain robs us) with ethnic overtones.

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45 Data from the Catalan Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió (CEO).

In its first phase, the *procés* was articulated around the demand for a democratic consultation that included the option of independence. Around 80% of Catalans<sup>46</sup> supported this demand for “sovereignty”, as did some non-nationalist parties such as ICV-EUiA, Podem, and Barcelona en Comú, which would later merge into the new Catalunya en Comú party. Since 2010 there has been a huge popular mobilisation in defence of the “right to decide” driven by some non-partisan actors, such as the Catalan National Assembly and Òmnium Cultural. The development of the *procés* allowed the Catalan centre-right to recycle itself and stop the erosion caused by budget cuts and corruption, but at the same time forced it to subordinate itself to a wave of demands for independence that it did not control at all, and which would eventually force it to fulfil its promise to the end.

The passivity of the Spanish government in response to the demand for a referendum led to the “unilateral” turn of the independence forces. The critical point was the controversial call for a referendum on 1 October 2017. The consultation was not agreed with the Spanish government and was illegal from a juridical point of view, but more importantly, it lacked political legitimacy as an expression of popular sovereignty, since the majority of the non-nationalist population did not participate in the referendum: the “yes” vote was 90%, but only 42% of the electorate participated.<sup>47</sup>

However, the issue of the legitimacy of the referendum was displaced by the brutal intervention of the government, which sent ten thousand police officers to try to stop the referendum by force. The international condemnation of the government repression provided support for the independence movement to declare the independence of the new Catalan Republic. Actually, the statement was an empty gesture and lacked any practical effect. President Carles Puigdemont himself took the decision reluctantly and, immediately thereafter, proposed the suspension of its effects in order to enter into a dialogue with the Spanish government. The political message of the independence movement was extremely confusing, but it gave the Spanish government the excuse it needed to suspend the autonomy of Catalonia by applying Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution and imprisoning several pro-independence leaders accused of sedition, rebellion, and embezzlement.

The relationship of the left with the Catalan conflict has not been simple. From Catalonia, many voices pointed out that the pro-independence demand was the key to opening the lock of the regime of 78 and make way for a constituent process. However, its effect seems to have been just the opposite: the escalation of tension between the Catalan and Spanish governments – led by the protagonists of the regime of 78 in both territories – fed back and strengthened both. Moreover, the Catalan independence movement has encouraged a Spanish nationalist

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46 Data from *Metroscopia for El País* (24 September 2017). CEO offered a somewhat smaller figure: 71%, of which 23% made it a condition that the referendum would be an agreed one.

47 In the 2015 elections, called with an explicitly plebiscitary purpose and in which the bulk of independence supporters (with the exception of the CUP) ran together under the candidacy “Junts pel Sí,” the votes in favour of independence totalled 47.8%.

mobilisation unprecedented in recent history, and encouraged by both PP and Ciudadanos, which has applauded the legal and political repression. The Spanish right has found in the Catalan rebellion an enemy to justify its defence of the *status quo*, and the territorial conflict has once again displaced the social question from the central position of the political game board, both in Catalonia and in the rest of Spain.

The escalation of this conflict, in any case, may hide the fact that the problem is not only the confrontation between Spain and Catalonia (or their governments), but also the division within Catalonia between the independence and non-independence population. This division also has a class component. The independence movement is not just a project of the Catalan elites; in fact, it has achieved a strong rooting in broad sectors of Catalan society. But the truth is that it attracts more support among the middle class sectors with higher income, and less among the economically more vulnerable sectors of the working class, who are largely the children of immigrants from the rest of Spain.<sup>48</sup> The success of the independence project has been based on a certain invisibility of these urban working classes, mostly reluctant or indifferent to independence. That is why the main novelty of the Catalan elections convened on 21 December 2017 was the impressive rise of Ciudadanos, which became the most electorally supported force with more than one million supporters, many of them from those social sectors that previously were the stronghold of the Catalan left in the urban peripheries.

This scenario has been a source of problems for the left. In Catalonia, it has placed Catalunya en Comú in a difficult intermediate position in an increasingly polarised environment: on the one hand, it defended the holding of an agreed referendum; on the other, it did not support independence. This position has generated internal tensions and criticism from the rest of the actors. Although its procedural defence of an agreed referendum had majority support, it was unable to outline a clear alternative that would connect with the affections and identities mobilised by the conflict, nor to shift the debate towards the social issues that the *procés* had left in the background. In the rest of Spain, the Catalan crisis has taken its toll on Podemos (and perhaps to a lesser extent, on IU), whose intermediate position has been presented many times as conniving with the independence movement. This, despite the fact that the independence movement has reproached Podemos' lack of a more energetic response to the repression it has suffered.

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48 Llaneras, Kiko: El apoyo a la independencia tiene raíces económicas y de origen social, in: El País, 28 September 2017, [https://elpais.com/politica/2017/09/28/ratio/1506601198\\_808440.html](https://elpais.com/politica/2017/09/28/ratio/1506601198_808440.html) (15.11.2018).



This contrasts with the novel effort that Podemos was making to offer a national-popular project, which entailed a normalisation of the idea of “Spain,” thus resolving the Left’s deeply-felt antipathy towards it. One of the expressions of this effort was the defence of a patriotism – a term with problematic connotations – based on the defence of public services to protect citizens and respectful of the cultural plurality of Spain as a nation. This was a way of accepting that political practice must start from the “banal nationalism”<sup>49</sup> present in daily life, and that no project of change can turn its back on the national identity of the people it is trying to mobilise (although national identity is not particularly strong in Spain, where the majority possesses a hybrid Spanish and regional identity).

The Catalan crisis has also been a step back in this sense, because the left has been trailing events and has not managed to offer a “national project” that would break the nationalist polarisation and make visible an alternative “Spain” to the conservative one. That project involves reclaiming the progressive aspects of the country,<sup>50</sup> granting more value to its linguistic-cultural plurality, and incorporating in the agenda other crucial issues for its territorial structuring, such as the imbalance between the rural and urban world.

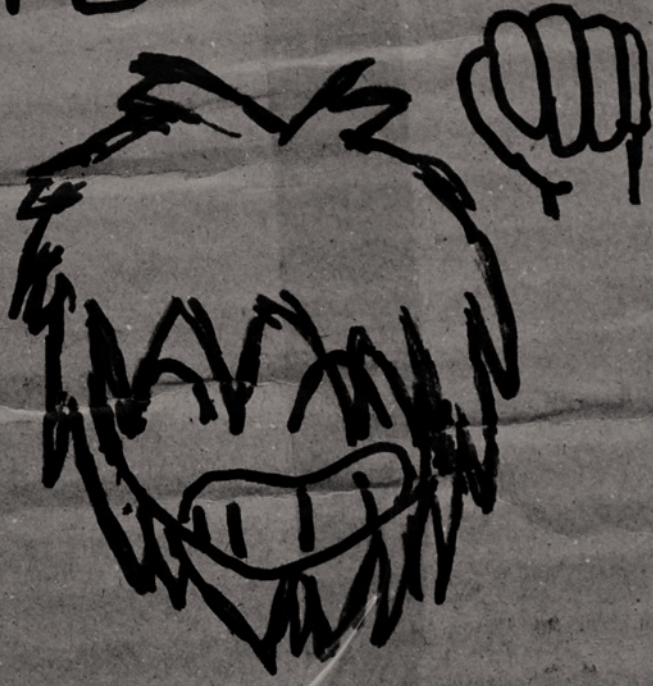
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49 Billig, Michael: *Banal Nationalism*, London, Sage, 1995.

50 Contrary to the traditional stereotype that even the left sometimes reproduces, the attitudes of Spaniards in relation to women, homosexuality, and immigrants are more egalitarian than the European average.

THE CURRENT BALANCE SHEET  
AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

TODOS  
POR LA  
LIBERTAD



One of the most recurrent images in these years has been the “window of opportunity” opened by the economic-political crisis. The widespread social support for 15M and the sudden emergence of Podemos extended the limits of what was thought possible and allowed us to think that a profound political change, unimaginable a decade ago, could now break through. The outlines of this change have never been clear and, at times, inventive slogans have replaced strategic debate. In the absence of an anti-capitalist project, the future that was envisaged was more a post-neoliberal scenario that would allow further democratisation of the economy and politics, as well as solving some of the unfinished business of Spanish society.

The successive impasses of this cycle – the retreat of social mobilisation in 2013 and the stagnation of Podemos after 2016 – have stoked the fear that the window of opportunity would close, either with a conservative restoration or with a return to traditional bipartisanship. This situation has led to an overly critical tone in the Spanish left, whose debates frequently focus on internal failures and conflicts, while underestimating their own successes. There have been many of these: in Spain there have been creative and vigorous social mobilisations, as well as electoral proposals that have managed to disrupt conventional political wisdom, producing a modest but significant change of the dominant rhetorics around issues such as commercialisation and de-democratisation and gender equality. So a more balanced diagnosis of the current situation may be that of “catastrophic draw”: the elites have largely resisted the challenge of the forces of change, but can no longer limit themselves to turning their back on their demands.

This tie has crystallised in a new quadripartite system whose stability is not definitive and which continues to rest largely on the left-right axis. The conflict in this party system moves away from the dichotomy of the “populist” scenario and takes two different forms. On the one hand, there is a competition between the progressive (PSOE and Podemos) and liberal-conservative (PP and Ciudadanos) spaces to see which of the two can obtain an electoral majority; on the other, there is an internal struggle for hegemony in each of these spaces. The “populist moment” has given way to a complex four-party game, in which institutional alliances in order to form governments and promote progressive policies have taken the place of impeachment challenges.

This change of scenery has obliged the forces of change to modulate their rhetoric, and it reopens the old debate on the left about its policy of pacts with the PSOE. However, the position of Podemos and the “confluences” is different from the one that IU has traditionally held, therefore offering new possibilities of overcoming the dangers of subalternity and isolation. Outside the institutions, the mobilising dynamic shows signs of resurgence, although there is still no glimpse of any way of organising that could institutionalise this flow of social energy. The window of opportunity is narrower, but the situation for the left is more hopeful than ten years ago, or than in most European countries.

In this sense, critical reflection on lost opportunities must not lose sight of the constraints that have surrounded the action of the forces of the left, as well as the perverse effects that other alternatives not taken might have had. But, similarly, the supporters of the strategies that have been followed should be clear about the serious limitations of some of the decisions that have been made, as well as their self-destructive effects in the medium term.

A more prudent attitude could favour collective debate around the basic dilemmas that have characterised this political cycle and probably will continue to do so in the near future: the problems of rhetoric, organisation, subject and the strategies of change that we noted at the beginning. Foreign activists wishing to draw lessons from the Spanish experience could take note of these dilemmas and the way they have been addressed in order to take advantage of the successes achieved without falling into the errors.

## RHETORIC: TRANSVERSALITY AND ITS LIMITATIONS

One of the features of the Spanish political cycle – in particular 15M and Podemos – has been the adoption of a “transversal” rhetoric that transcended the commonplaces of the more traditional left and got closer to a certain less ideologised “common sense.” The objective was to leave the discursive comfort zone into which parties and movements had been locked, in order to occupy the “middle ground of the political game board” with its alternative proposals, suppressing the ideological references that could repel those less steeped in politics or suffer typecasting by the media. This innovation – spontaneous in the case of 15M, planned in the case of Podemos – has been one of the keys to its success, but it has also provoked two types of criticism.

The first consists in considering transversality as a form of political moderation and ideological renunciation. This criticism originated in 15M, but has gained weight with Podemos. In many cases, it responds to a politically sterile “left-wing identitarianism”; but it also points to a real risk. The problem, in any case, is not so much moderation – because political action should not be measured so much by the radicalism of the rhetoric but by the scope of the results – but the belief that adopting the language of transversality is sufficient to avoid the conflict inherent in social change, by presenting political alternatives as basically consensual. It seems clear that we must appeal to transversal values that can attract broad social support, but also that there are conflicts (distributive and value-based) that we cannot ignore. Contrary to what the 99% slogan suggests, the structure of any modern society is much more complex: the interests of the popular classes not only face the power of the 1%, but can also clash with the interests of the middle classes in areas such as tax reform or education policy. The possibility of political change implies different risks, opportunities, and costs for different groups. Transversal rhetoric is helpful for bringing these groups together in a hegemonic bloc, but it cannot avoid the possible divergences between their interests.

The second type of criticism denounces the excessive reliance on marketing communication and neglect of the material bases of politics. The reason is that the thesis of transversal rhetoric has seen a novel and audacious use of the media, particularly television. The media popularity of Pablo Iglesias, Íñigo Errejón, and Alberto Garzón, as well as the communicative ability to place alternative messages in a medium traditionally hostile to transformative proposals, have been key in this political cycle. But they have also been shown to be a double-edged sword. The initial success of Podemos led to exaggeration of the potential of political communication and media effects, to the detriment of patient and anonymous political organisation. Ironically, the media overexposure of Podemos has ended up eroding its public image and the credibility of its leaders, as well as amplifying the successive internal crises. In addition, the use of “audience democracy” runs the risk of eroding or simplifying the quality of political debate. In any case, while being aware of the limitations of “communicative transversality”, we should not lose sight of the importance and the successes of that wager.

Around these two groups of criticisms there have been controversies based on the confusion of discursive *forms* with political *contents*. In other words, transversality – the use of inclusive

discursive frameworks with more power to appeal than those of the “traditional” left – seems an undeniable gain of this political cycle.<sup>51</sup> The problems mentioned above are often real, but they may not necessarily derive from the commitment to transversality, which is a discursive form that can adopt different contents and is compatible with different organisational forms.

Actually, transversality is an indispensable discursive framework...but nothing more. In particular, it does not offer a strategic or substantive response to the problems that the left faces. Something similar happens with the debate around “common sense”: nobody has argued that the left must conform to “hegemonic” common sense (if such a thing exists) and abandon its transformative ambition. The objective has rather been to present the program of the left as a set of sensible or “common sense” measures, that is, appealing to certain widely held beliefs and preferences, instead of reaffirming itself in identitarian rhetorics using terminology incomprehensible to many people. But that leaves everything important still to do: “common sense” can be the starting point for proposed transformations and the shared horizon they intend to reach, but the pending question is how to travel the path between them.

Hence the “transversal” wager supported by “common sense” leads to a certain possibilism surrounded by inevitable tensions: what aspects of rhetoric should be restrained in order to gain more support? What frameworks must be accepted in order to have a “winning” rhetoric? To what extent does that moderation conflict with the substantive proposals put forward? These are questions that only by concrete political practice can answer, although that carries the risk of making completely wrong decisions.

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Probably the most talked about was the way in which Podemos initially avoided including feminism (and, in particular, the conflict around abortion) in its agenda, considering it to be divisive. In hindsight, this position was a mistake, and, in fact, it was soon revised thanks to the work of feminists within Podemos. But those kinds of mistakes do not invalidate the commitment to “transversality” and “common sense.” In fact, we may understand the recent feminist wave in Spain as the successful result of a “transversal” strategy of feminism itself, which has managed to build a broad “we” around broadly shared demands, such as the defence of equality at work, sexual freedom, the rejection of sexist violence and the crisis in care.<sup>52</sup>

The search for a balance between consensus and confrontation – which should not be reduced to moderate or radical rhetoric – depends largely on a certain political astuteness. However, at the same time it must have some anchorage in social forces and not be solely a project designed by their leaderships. This requires organisational tools that link the former to the latter to avoid possible divorces. That brings us to the second problem.

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51 In fact, it is not a radical novelty either: the transforming forces that throughout history have obtained the support of the social majority have usually appealed to “the people,” “the many,” etc., and some current successes – like those of Sanders or Corbyn – have also adopted this discursive framework.

52 Serra, Clara: *Leonas y zorras: estrategias políticas feministas*, Madrid, Los Libros de la Catarata, 2018.

## ORGANISATION: DEMOCRACY AND EFFICACY

The organisational innovations of this political cycle have been the response to a deep disaffection with the political parties, but they also reflect the lessons learned from 15M on the limitations of assemblyism (neighbourhood-based direct democracy). The objective was to build new organisational forms that operated democratically and acted effectively. In this sense, there has been an expansion and renewal of organisational tools in order to escape the dynamics of the “old politics,” a refreshing and necessary task for a left trapped in its own internal labyrinths. However, the results of these innovations have been problematic, and in some cases, disastrous. In general, participatory openness has led to an erosion of organisational capacity without an effective democratisation of power. This is an impressionist description, since the situation varies in the different territories and organisations; but we can argue that the idea of a movement-party is mere wishful thinking.

The main experimentation laboratory has been Podemos. In many ways, Podemos has been a success. In particular, its determination to take the first step was key to breaking into the political scene and re-drawing the electoral map. Adopting an informal top-down organisation, based on a small cohesive campaign team and a broad grassroots mobilisation campaign, was crucial for this. In this way, it not only avoided many problems that accompany the endless and conflictual processes of choosing unitary candidates, but was able to articulate a rhetoric that did not come from a space of political marginality.

But its subsequent development has cast dark shadows that any project in the making should seriously consider. Some of the new “participatory” procedures implemented – especially the use of primaries and consultations – have not only failed to rein in the oligarchic tendencies of the old parties, but have often accelerated them through their use of plebiscites. The result has not only been the concentration of power, but the exacerbation of factional confrontations and the consequent deterioration of the internal climate of the organisation. A context in which the winner takes everything opens the door to abuse of power and tends to impoverish deliberation. The end result looks much more like a party of notables than a party of the masses.

Undoubtedly, the commitment to the “electoral war machine” was a response to special circumstances. As we have said, Podemos faced a frenzied electoral timetable, lacked organisational resources (experienced cadres, territorial base, militant culture) and encountered the hostility of political and media actors. In addition, it feared that the leftist elements would ruin the commitment to transversality. But in the choice of that model, a certain disdain for the republican form of internal organisation – particularly, for the control of arbitrary power – intervened, with the short-sighted view that guarantees and limitations were not that necessary if the power was in good hands. Subsequent experience has shown again that the perverse effects of many organisational dynamics often escape the control of those who lead them, and that such dynamics are difficult to reverse once activated.



The result has not only been a democratic deficit, but also an organisational one: the evolution of the “electoral war machine” has proved ineffective in many aspects. The continuous internal conflicts fostered by a model lacking inclusivity have fuelled factionalism at different levels of the party, thus preventing it from developing its organisation (establishing a territorial base, creating intermediate structures, training cadres, etc.) and favouring clearly dysfunctional elements. The lack of organisational development has become a major problem in the new “war of positions” scenario, in which gradual progress in terms of public debate, political proposals, and territorial establishment proves more important than the electoral skirmishes with which Podemos began its journey.

This context helps to explain the leadership styles of the charismatic hyperleaders during these years, which oscillated between the conciliatory tone of Manuela Carmena and the more vehement one of Pablo Iglesias. Undoubtedly, the ability of these people to intervene in a media space largely impervious to the messages of the left has been key; but, in a scenario with little organic basis and an excess of plebiscitary mechanisms, media visibility has translated into a centralisation of power without accountability or counterbalancing mechanisms. Little effort has been devoted to complementing the communicative work around charismatic leaderships with the expansion of their organisations’ social base through popular implementation at the local level.

The relative failure of the “new politics” counsels prudence before throwing away the organisational experience of the “old left.” Without forgetting some of its limitations, we must acknowledge that it had a truly organic nature absent from the new parties and platforms. This has meant that, for example, new electoral projects lack qualified intermediate cadres to perform their functions, and are apparently incapable of creating mechanisms for moulding them in the future. But it has also led to a deficit of “normative density”: formal and informal rules that limit the scope of discretion and subordinate individual actions to the organisation’s aims.<sup>53</sup>

None of these shadows should hide the positive aspects of the organisational renewal of this political cycle. In particular, the black box of political parties has been opened and there has been a vigorous discussion about how to democratise them. The opening up in terms of participation and transparency is an undeniable achievement: the question now is how to preserve it by solving the dysfunctions we have discussed. In other words, there is still the problem of how to create democratic organisations that combine efficacy and plurality, in a social environment without strong ideological loyalties and changing forms of commitment. The solution is far from simple; the “grass-roots” alternative has often led to an ineffective “democratic elitism”. In order to think what means are suitable, we must be clear about the objectives that a democratic party should respect, and among these should be the effective participation of as wide a social base as possible. That brings us to the third problem.

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53 The general picture is ironically reminiscent of the anti-bureaucratic criticism of the Fordist venture. The neoliberal commitment to flexible and participative enterprise has not led to its democratisation, but has given rise to forms of labour organisation that do not avoid the iron relations of power – they often accentuate them – but make them more invisible and insidious (see du Gay, Paul: *In praise of bureaucracy*, London, Sage Publications, 2000).

## SUBJECTS: PEOPLE AND CLASS

The success of inclusive (or transversal) interpellations like “the people” or “the 99%” has led sometimes to a certain forgetfulness of the divisions that cut across the social structure. In particular, there are two elements of conflict in recent Spanish politics that have proved elusive in analyses of the left: generational character and class bias.

The generational divide between young and old is an essential element of the overturning of the party system in Spain. As suggested in Table 1, age (or, rather, generation) has been a crucial factor in electoral behaviour, above income, gender or educational level. The electorate of the traditional parties is older and consists of the generations that lived through the Transition, while those born later make up the bulk of Podemos and, to a lesser extent, Ciudadanos voters. In a way, the emergence of the “new politics” could be understood as a process of generational renewal of the left that under normal conditions would have gone through conventional channels, but in the context of the economic crisis and 15M has acquired an explosive character. But there is a class bias in this generational change: the social group who have led this political cycle are middle class young people with frustrated expectations, which imposes certain limitations on political change.

The most disadvantaged social groups, with fewer economic and cultural resources, have played a secondary role in this cycle. As we pointed out, it is not a specific feature of Spain,<sup>54</sup> but perhaps it has acquired a clearer expression here than in other places. This problem went unnoticed in the first half of this political cycle, but little by little it has been breaking through. Initially, for example, it was habitual for liberal meritocratic ideology to use “new politics” as a weapon against the regime itself, thought to be failing to offer those with good educational attainment, such as a bachelor’s or a master’s degree, the expected professional rewards, thus squandering the human capital of the most highly educated young people. It was an effective rhetoric, which attracted the support of qualified young people who felt that the crisis had broken the meritocratic promises of social advancement in which they had been socialised. However, it was also a double-edged sword: it tended to see as normal the fact that class origin determines educational success, and did not contribute to politicising people with different problems and needs.

In recent times, this issue has found a greater echo, but has often led to sterile polemics linked to conflicts between the various sensibilities of the left: class divisions opposed the discursive renewal or struggles of other groups, often romanticising a non-existent working class. Meanwhile, there has been little concrete analysis of class structure and its associated forms of subjectivity, as well as its effects for political change, and within mobilisations and organisations. As a result, few alternatives have been offered: traditional workerism is not only unrealistic, it is also sterile; it does not refer to any real social group nor does it contribute to expanding the bloc that favours change. In addition, even in its more subtle

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54 Tugal, Cihan: Elusive revolt: The contradictory rise of middle-class politics, in: Thesis Eleven 1/130, 2015, 74–95.

versions, it suffers from a certain voluntarism, imagining that there is a political subject waiting to be activated by better-disposed leaders.

In Spain, as in any European country, a majority political project can only be built from a bloc that brings together the middle classes and the working (or popular) classes. But the direction and scope of this “hegemonic bloc” depends largely on the former not being the only ones to take the lead. That is why it is important to ensure that, without losing sight of the necessary breadth of this bloc, the popular classes play a greater role than they have enjoyed so far. Otherwise, there is a risk that the middle classes manage to present their own interests as the general interest (this is one of the senses of “hegemony”), reducing the redistributive scope of political changes.

Of course, these categories are somewhat general and do not do justice to the complexity of the Spanish social structure. Within the middle class there are sectors that have undergone a process of downward social mobility (objective and subjective), or for whom their educational credentials are not sufficient to escape precarity. Similarly, the living conditions and political orientations of sociocultural professionals are different from those of managers and technicians. On the other hand, different social and labour realities and political positions coexist also within the working class between, for example, traditional workers, autonomous professionals, impoverished migrants, or precarious young people in the service sector.

The complexity of the class structure, as well as its unequal relevance when it comes to shaping people’s identities and political preferences, are not reasons to ignore class in the strategic debate. Quite the contrary: as long as class determines the vital opportunities of the people and structures many of the distributive conflicts, politics will revolve in one way or another around it. For that reason, it is important that the left address this problem in a realistic and not merely in a romantic way. Whether the political articulations that take place around class conflicts adopt an egalitarian or conservative form depends on this, as many current examples in Europe show.

Having said all this, we do not have magical formulas here either. The reality of the working classes today is very different from that of half a century ago, so the history of the labour movement can be inspiring but does not offer many concrete clues for articulating an alternative political majority. But at least we can become aware of the barriers that hinder politicisation of the popular classes in an emancipatory direction, both in public institutions and within the political organisations themselves, due to the mechanisms that block, in an invisible but systematic way, the presence and centrality of groups with fewer resources in terms of social and cultural capital.

The result of all these obstacles is a lack of visibility of their needs and demands, displaced by the hegemony of the middle class in the public sphere and in political dynamics. The danger of the progressive political exclusion of the popular classes is that it weakens the options of any democratising process and opens the door to the conservative forces that make capital from their discontent. In this sense, recognising these social divisions that cut across “the people” is a starting point – indispensable but insufficient – for designing strategies aimed at forging broad social blocs that bring together different groups, without the “particular” interests of the most privileged being presented as “general” ones. But this is a contingent enterprise that depends, to a large extent, on the political ability to take advantage of the historic opportunities that arise.

## STRATEGY: INSTITUTIONS AND MOBILISATIONS

The energy deployed in this political cycle, both in the abundant social mobilisations and in the irruption of new political forces, contrasts with the paucity of tangible results: austerity policies have hardly stopped, the State has taken a repressive turn, workers have continued to lose rights, and elites retain their benefits and privileges. The political enthusiasm experienced with 15M has led to a certain disenchantment and scepticism. The municipalist experience is an exception, but it has not escaped criticism by some of the activists who promoted it.

The Spanish left seems to have gone on a rollercoaster during these years, and that has translated into an evolution of the strategic horizons on offer. Among various groups of activists the pendulum has oscillated. Prior to the political-economic crisis, a situation of weakness encouraged an adjustment of expectations (expressed in the slogan “change the world without taking power”). It then swung towards an excessive optimism after 15M at the possibility of entering and changing the institutions (“assaulting the polls,” “hacking democracy,” were oft-repeated slogans after 2011). Finally, it returned to the myth of mobilisation (“back to the streets”) as a key to transforming society.

In this way, the strategic debate about the most propitious actors and spaces to promote emancipatory social changes has returned, usually posed as a double choice between (or, at least, a greater emphasis on) political parties and institutions on one side, and movements and social mobilisations on the other.<sup>55</sup> In both cases, there is the habit of a certain wishful thinking, by magnifying the power of one or the other option. However, the dilemma of whether to transform local government – “gubernismo”, or build a mass movement – “movimentismo” seems wrong: neither are movements and social mobilisations a mere hindrance to the construction of a social majority capable of taking power, as some political leaders seem to believe, nor is the conquest of institutional positions a dead end. Both strategies can coexist in the framework of a transformative project; the question is to find ways in which they can combine in fertile ways, creating the most productive division of labour as possible. This should recognise the relative autonomy of both spheres but at the same time establish appropriate communication, exchange, and control mechanisms based on loyalty and trust.

Without a doubt, this does not eliminate the possibility of conflicts and disagreements. In this case, they have been fuelled by the imbalance between the two strategies: the good electoral results of Podemos and the confluences, as well as the conquest of the main city councils, have absorbed a large part of militant resources into public office and advisor positions. This has meant a transfer of cadres from the existing movements and social mobilisations, but it has also displaced the majority of the debates around the successes and mistakes made in the institutional field.

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55 In addition, discussions are often marred by rather crude preconceptions: for example, to what extent does the existence of large mobilisations reflect the presence of strong social movements?

The irruption in the institutions has been a novel experience for many activists who previously viewed them with extreme suspicion and for those who did not even participate in politics, and it has brought with it the subsequent danger of institutional co-option or, at least, of exaggerating the transforming potential they offer. It has also caused misunderstandings among other activists: the commitment to governing political institutions is full of uncomfortable personal dilemmas that until now nobody had raised, and that has been one of the most important collective learning processes of this political cycle. At the political level, the favourable effects on the status quo of the mechanisms that govern political institutions have cooled the aspirations that were there at the beginning. Nevertheless, this “logic of the State”, as some critics have pointed out, does not exclude the possibility of using it as a tool for social change, while being aware of its limitations and dangers.

Finally, it is not just a case of thinking about how to combine institutional representation and the organisation of protest, but about anchoring both strategies in more solid organisational forms and exploring other complementary options. Specifically, the creation of alternative institutional forms that fulfil the dual objective of solving specific problems and needs while offering democratic mechanisms of organisation (such as solidarity networks, the social economy, and alternative means of communication). These institutional alternatives can be based on total self-organisation or establish symbiotic mechanisms with the State at its different levels.

However, for these alternatives to flourish, it is important that they become a priority for the left organised in social movements and, above all, in political parties. Although this objective seems to enjoy widespread support, there has been little progress towards it, in terms of transferring organisational and material resources to these initiatives unhindered by internal struggles or the favouring of clientelist networks.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps one of the underlying reasons for this inability is the fact that the “retributions of militancy”<sup>57</sup> make political participation in institutions more attractive than in other more anonymous fronts.

The problem, to be honest, is that any constructive strategy in this field moves at a slow pace, while Spanish political life of recent years, both electoral and in media, is completely unrestrained. This being the case, Erik Olin Wright’s appeal to strategic pluralism in the space of the left seems particularly wise:<sup>58</sup> there are many modes of social change, each with its pros and cons, the question is to accept that pluralism and establish less maximalist debates about the different options.

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56 One of the few exceptions of significant scale was the Impulsa project by Podemos – aimed at supporting and financing initiatives with social impact promoted by non-profit entities – which, unfortunately, has not had continuity.

57 Gaxie, Daniel: Rétributions du militantisme et paradoxes de l’action collective, in: *Swiss Political Science Review* 11/1, 2011, 157–188.

58 Wright, Erik Olin: How to Be an Anticapitalist Today, in: *Jacobin*, December 2015, [www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/erik-olin-wright-real-utopias-anticapitalism-democracy](http://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/erik-olin-wright-real-utopias-anticapitalism-democracy) (15.11.2018).

Perhaps one of the most destructive legacies of the traditional left is the identification of sectarian rhetoric as a sign of political resolution. In the analysis of the success of 15M or Podemos one often finds opportunistic answers that legitimise the position of one or the other and carefully ignore the role played by fortune, by chance. But they also frequently neglect a diffuse but crucial element. Both in 15M and in the beginnings of Podemos, and, more recently, in the feminist mobilisations of 2018, there was the possibility of an open deliberation – public and diffuse in 15M, more discreet and articulated in Podemos – that was much more cordial, empathetic and loyal than that usually found on the left. It often resulted in somewhat naive positions, but it also led to an effective fraternity that finally proved to be an essential, perhaps irreplaceable, precondition to a successful exercise of political imagination.





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