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Power in Podemos

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Description:

Podemos's second congress reaffirmed Pablo Iglesias's power. But there were also openings for a more democratic, left party.

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Although it is hard to believe, the second Podemos congress, named after its venue, Vistalegre II, has already happened. Its agonizing development and preparation is a direct consequence of the type of party created at its first congress, in October 2014. The second congress can be summarized as a confrontation without debate and a spectacle without substance.

Its result has clear consequences: Pablo Iglesias has been reelected general secretary and his team will rule Podemos at ease. For Errejón, former number two and Iglesias's rival at the congress, any past time was better. The smaller Anticapitalistas current and the list it held with other independent activists, Podemos en Movimiento, managed to show that there is another Podemos, albeit still small compared to the two main factions of the former leadership.

The final outcome of the congress, more a battle for power than a real discussion about the party's future plans, is a facelift of what was decided at Vistalegre I. What was at stake was mainly the risk of negative changes rather than positive ones: either to move towards the final political normalization of Podemos (advocated by Errejón) or to remain a rebellious force but with major strategic incoherence (as Iglesias defended).

So, at Vistalegre II, Podemos did not ultimately become worse but neither did it substantially improve. The main strategic limits approved at the first congress were not seriously re-discussed and the same goes for the organizational model, despite some small improvements. The overall assessment of the congress is crystal clear: the best thing that happened was that the worst was avoided.

On the tortuous road to the second Podemos conference, held once again in Vistalegre two weeks ago, many observers devised analogies to explain Pablo Iglesias, Íñigo Errejón, and their respective political projects. The comparison to Bruce Springsteen and Coldplay became the most well-known. But the HBO drama *The Wire* provides a number of useful similarities to the left-wing Spanish party.

The fight between Iglesias, the general secretary, and Errejón, the political secretary, resembles the relationship between Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell. Barksdale is a tough guy, proud to be a gangster; Bell, his coldly intelligent manipulative second-in-command, aspires to become a real businessman, escaping the neighborhood's brutality and gaining social respectability. Friends since childhood, they built their empire by mercilessly taking out their adversaries. So goes their partnership: Bell ends up dead, Barksdale goes to prison, and a rival gang takes over their turf.

The comparison does fail on one level: in the series, everyone prefers Bell, a far more compelling character than his conventional boss. In Podemos, it's reversed: Iglesias has more daring politics and a more explosive style, while his second-in-command is the more predictable figure who wants to become leader and move the party toward moderation and respectability.

Beyond the Barksdale-Bell power struggle, community activists struggled to improve their neighborhood. In Podemos, this appears as the left-wing dissident current that makes up the Anticapitalistas. Marginalized since the first Vistalegre congress in October 2014, they came to this meeting hoping to avert the battle between leaders in order to shift the discussion toward the need for another party and line.

The analogy with *The Wire* goes a little deeper here. When asked about his approach to writing *The Wire*, its creator

David Simon summed up his ethos: "fuck the average reader."

While following his advice would counter Errejón's calls for "transversality" and his strategy of "seducing those who are missing" into joining the party, a political party cannot dismiss average readers that is, average voters as easily as television writers. A party like Podemos must win over voters, but it needn't adapt the product to mainstream tastes or transform Podemos into a disposable blockbuster.

Two models of the blockbuster-Podemos appeared at the congress: one that tried to mix marketability with quality (Iglesias) and one that would do anything to please its audience (Errejón). But beyond these models, from the margins of the party, and with growing respect from the rank and file, the Anticapitalistas current gained ground. This current espouses The Wire's approach, emphasizing the quality of the script and narrative consistency.

This approach shouldn't be understood as the defense of a minority project, but rather a demand for a project that matches its own ambition for social change a party as massive as it is good. It's not hard to imagine what a party like this could be. Just think of the massive, powerful 15-M mobilizations that precipitated Podemos.

Total War

Vistalegre I was an environment of bureaucratic assault on party militants and dissidents in an environment of a permanent state of exception. This produced an internal war between the party's ruling factions, of which Vistalegre II became the decisive battle. Rather than seeking the absolute annihilation of its enemy, each faction aimed at weakening its adversary enough to gain a larger overall share of power.

It was Vistalegre I that planted the seeds for Vistalegre II's total war. The political culture and organizational dynamics adopted there wrote this outcome into the party's source code. What's worse, no one criticized the Vistalegre I model or addressed the real causes of the internal battle in the weeks leading up to Vistalegre II. Instead we heard only vacuous appeals to "good sense," "calm," and "unity."

The first Vistalegre certified that the party had never been a common good belonging to its militants, but the property of its leaders. Its bureaucratic and communicative electoral war machine was, at the same time, a private and proprietary party; the bureaucratic privatization of the militant commons birthed a Podemos Inc., and the leaders increased their power at the same time that power became ever more personalized. This process of personalization is intertwined with its institutionalization, which ratifies it.

Around Iglesias and Errejón, a Frankenstein apparatus emerged, autonomous from its own militant base. Its internal logic entailed that any strong disagreements would turn into battles for power in which only two outcomes were possible: perish or win. Survival implied control of the bureaucratic monster.

The Vistalegre II debate revealed Podemos's hyper-ideologized pragmatism. That is to say, the organization's conception of politics systematically emptied its real political, intellectual, and strategic concerns. All discussions are reduced to finding a way to win elections, but they nevertheless start from real problems and questions of substance. In one sense, Podemos is a hive of ideas; in another, it banalizes them all.

The whole congressional process reflected this dynamic: the lack of debate culture, the political discussions at the top that did not offer real platforms for the rank and file to discuss, the dynamics of competition, the permanent internal campaigning that resembles nothing more than the North American parties' primaries, and the extreme

personalization of all discussions.

This latter aspect has become identical to politics in general, even more so in mass communication societies. But in Podemos's case, the very nature of the project Iglesias and Errejón promoted exacerbated this tendency: the party's personalist culture was coupled with archaic chivalrous masculinities that paradoxically turned into heartless Borgian intrigues. Honor with ridiculous tints on one side, unscrupulous vileness on the other.

Among the many examples of personalization and hypocrisy used by both fractions was the appearance of the worn-out claim that "the leader is good, but his team is bad": both Iglesias and Errejón are intelligent, but ill-advised and poor-quality generals. This has some truth. Errejón supporters seem like poor copies of their chief, and many Pabloites reproduce all the defects and none of the virtues of their general secretary. Political coarseness and organizational brutality are hallmarks of Iglesias's team, as are the semi-intellectualized elitist careerism and bureaucratic triviality of Errejón's. In the final analysis, however, the opposition between the two and their collaborators lacks a solid foundation. This tactic, which precludes attacks on the other faction's charismatic leader, further depoliticized the battle and further personalized the discussion.

Only Podemos en Movimiento, the list backed by Anticapitalistas, refused to engage in the politics of total war. Its outsider status made it easier to move away from the battle's dirty ground and concentrate on the political dimension. Above all, this represented a deliberate political decision, a specific conception of how things should be done. Its own campaign was about the existence of another Podemos; its result legitimized it as a current within Podemos, appearing as the most critical appraisal of the existing Podemos and the best incarnation of the potential Podemos. Many have called Anticapitalistas's role at Vistalegre II a moral victory, but this should be taken as a starting point, not as a comfortable destination.

In the midst of this factional battle, some sectors linked to Errejón called for transcending block dynamics and voting across lists. The proposal had certain merits but presented four problems that showed it could offer no alternative to total war. First, the campaign was mounted by supporters of the block that was most likely to lose. As a result, it appeared as a self-interested attempt to slow down the inevitable crash. Second, it represented a partial apology for the Vistalegre I model but did not consider that the first congress actually created the current situation. It was trying to avoid a train wreck without recognizing its cause. Third, it was obvious that the third player, Podemos en Movimiento, was doing things differently. Supporting its list was a practical way of disarming the two warring giants. Finally, the proposal to select names from each of the three lists ultimately fell again into Podemos's endemic weakness: personalization over debate.

Reality TV Politics

The high-profile confrontation between Iglesias and Errejón drew a lot of attention. The role of conventional mass media and social media in current politics and the organizational and communication model set up at Vistalegre I share equal blame in this.

In conventional parties, banal spectacle coincides with their project and identity. This has become a defining aspect of Podemos as it currently exists and a denial of its original conception as a political force that defies the establishment and embodies another politics.

Podemos's peculiarity comes not from its vacuous televised and tweeted spectacle, but rather from the fact that these politics are based on a real project of social change. The trivialization and banalization of its project, launched at Vistalegre I, could never be totally completed as it required denying the party's foundational basis. As a result, the

shift toward reality-TV politics has felt even more devastating because it confirmed an already undeniable tension between the existing Podemos and what many thought, wanted, and trusted Podemos to be.

To borrow from Gramsci, we might say that Podemos is a centaur: half empty spectacle, half substance. This does not mean that a politics with substance can survive without well-conceived communicative, aesthetic, and emotional terms. Rather, communication, aesthetics, and emotion should be serve substantive content, not the banalization of ideas, proposals, and strategies.

When communication does not serve politics but becomes the essence of it, any political battle will turn into a spectacle. The subsumption of politics under communication entails the subsumption of the discussion under the spectacle. When it degenerates into an uncontrolled factional battle, the politics of spectacle gives way to reality-TV politics.

Reality-TV politics deploy an artificial transparency in which everything seems to be apparent against a background of deception. For Podemos, this turned into a public display of the party's internal life à la Big Brother, which disconcerted its base. But this took place in the midst of gestures that played to the gallery, like the ritual apologies to militants that were supposed to transmit humility, the proposals with obvious ulterior motives, like praising the adversary by claiming that it is needed, and hidden battles. This public over-exposure combined with artificiality marked the way to Vistalegre II.

Podemos's Non-Program

From the start, the Iglesias-Errejón tandem had a functional division of labor. The former acted as a charismatic leader, while the latter developed the party's strategy and took control of its apparatus. Errejón enjoyed hegemony and domination, which was sometimes destabilized by the weight of Iglesias's leadership. Politics in Podemos began with Errejón's ideas, which Iglesias readjusted for practical everyday application.

After the rupture between them, Errejón partially lost control of the apparatus and found himself in a minority position before the general secretary's overwhelming power. For the first time, the party leader publicly questioned Errejón's strategic hypotheses. This placed him in a defensive position before a battle that he did not (yet) want and which he already sensed he would lose. But the political culture and the core ideas the Vistalegre I model of which Errejón was the main architect and political hegemon framed the terms of the debate.

Put differently: Errejón occupied an adverse and defensive position because of the Iglesias's irresistible force although Iglesias too showed weaknesses at some moments. In turn, Iglesias had to start the battle from Errejón's strategic and intellectual hegemony and try to formulate a new interpretation and partial amendment of his opponent's populist hypotheses, concepts, and concerns. Iglesias never presented a coherent alternative to Errejónismo, although he has gradually differentiated himself since March 2016, offering successive short-lived formulas that lacked internal solidity, culminating in his sudden and opportunistic conversion to social democracy on the eve of last June's general elections.

The hegemonic culture Errejón generated was based on strong party identification, electoralism, political moderation, the total fusion of communication and politics (so that the latter dissolved into the former), extreme personalization, and a competitive culture of young winners. This was the Vistalegre I model's cultural-ideological substrate, which could be defined as an individualist and meritocratic populism. While the duo ran the party, Errejón set up the party's deeper strategy and tactics, and Iglesias translated them into his powerful communicative style, tuning them his own way. Iglesias's revisions made little substantial difference beyond amping up the rhetoric and toning down the

meritocratic individualism.

As Errejón himself has correctly pointed out, hegemony forces all disputes to occur on its own turf. A counterhegemonic strategy can fall into three traps: shutting itself into a fatalistic position, capitulating to the hegemony's unattainable strength, or formulating a resistance at the margins that cannot connect with the center. A good strategy avoids this triple risk. As Daniel Bensaïd writes:

It is necessary to agree to work in contradictions and real relations of force, rather than to believe, illusorily, in being able to deny or evade them. Because the subalterns (or the dominated ones) are not outside of the political terrain of the struggle, and domination is never whole and absolute. The outside is always inside.

Any attempt to subvert Vistalegre I must begin from the model it established. Thinking about another Podemos involves considering the existing Podemos, not the one that is desired or the one that was lost. Political culture, hegemonic ideas, rules of the game, the weight of the apparatus, and the identity of the party shape any attempt to change it. The challenge has been to transcend the dystopia of Vistalegre I without being bogged down in that monster's entrails. In the future, Vistalegre II will serve as the starting point for another step in reversing the machine created in October 2014.

Vistalegre I summed up a strategic hypothesis coined by Errejón and validated by Iglesias. The minority opposition voices stood against them but had trouble presenting a coherent alternative. In the midst of an overwhelming victory for populist ideas and proposals and their elevation to hegemonic thinking there was barely room left to capture the imagination of the rank-and-file membership regarding other horizons. Colonized by the Errejonian hypothesis, every other proposal had to react to it. Errejonismo became the negative reference for its opponents, who, as in any counterhegemonic resistance, had to adopt some of Errejón's premises to give the proposal an anticapitalist amendment.

In this sense, Podemos en Movimiento breaks the populist hypothesis diagonally, proposing another roadmap and another horizon. Its conception of victory as the dialectic between self-organization, mobilization, elections, and institutional work is complemented by consistent programmatic proposals that confront both the content and the execution of Iglesias and Errejón's program.

The populist hypothesis, in Errejón's hard version and in Iglesias's instrumental version, never related to the electoral program, which consequently became a sort of non-program, to borrow a concept from anthropologist Marc Augé. Just as a "non-place refers" to those locations that do not confer identity, relations, or history to the people who pass through it, a non-program does not express or give coherence to the party's vision of the world; it does not grant the party an identity, tools for politics, or levers to point in the right direction. Relegated to the margins of party activity, the Podemos non-program has been largely invisible (it plays no role in party politics), liquid (it is reformulated when convenient), and solvent (each revision waters down the last).

One of the future challenges for Podemos en Movimiento will be to deepen the programmatic debate and, in doing so, to increase the concrete political debate within the party. It will not seek a fetish program but a program-map that aids political reflection and helps formulate proposals that can be used for mass mobilization. This programmatic debate must always be put in relation to a more general strategic discussion, since a program without a strategy can turn into a mere catalog of proposals, and a strategy without a program runs the risk of being too general.

Anticapitalistas in Motion

At the first congress, when the total political victory of the Iglesias-Errejón tandem became apparent, Podemos's dissident currents faced many obstacles to presenting an alternative political project. They had to entrench themselves in the democratic and organizational questions, receiving support from an important part of the most politicized party activists who had become aware of the hierarchical and authoritarian delirium Iglesias and Errejón were advocating.

But they failed to connect with the less politicized militants or with the legions of members registered online. They also struggled to communicate the political, organizational, and strategic problems with the populist hypothesis. In reality, it could not be otherwise: the rank and file were swept up in their enthusiasm for the party's march to stardom.

The second round has been different. Despite a high vote for the two main candidates, the 13 percent Podemos en Movimiento received is an important result. Its campaign successfully combined hard political content with a friendly tone, as well as political fighting with democratic respect for others. It presented a good model for the much-debated discussion of Podemos's rhetorical style and its strategy for reaching voters.

The critics at Vistalegre I, stigmatized by the leadership, appeared to a large segment of Podemos's base as a foreign body in the party. At the second congress, Iglesias and Errejón looked like strangers. Many rank-and-file-members did not recognize their general secretary or their political secretary in the weeks prior to Vistalegre II.

But they were both in their purest states. We have seldom seen a Pablo Iglesias or an Íñigo Errejón as genuine and unmasked as they were on the road to the second congress. Even their deceptions were, in the end, very genuine. Both seemed to betray Podemos and demolish the hopes placed in them, but they have also been more faithful to themselves and their own version of the party. The Podemos built at Vistalegre I, in this sense, did not reveal its full nature until Vistalegre II arrived.

The factional struggle has demonstrated the absolute need for an organization like Anticapitalistas and a candidate list like Podemos en Movimiento's. To imagine the battle at this second congress without them is darkly sinister. What would have happened if those who resisted the current at the first Vistalegre had thrown in the towel as Iglesias and Errejón intended? The answer is quite disturbing.

Anticapitalistas has had several phases in its intervention in Podemos. Marginalized by the founding group's poor methods, the left-wing current had to struggle for survival in the period between the 2014 European elections and the first Vistalegre in October of that year. After the founding congress, it embarked on a slow and defensive war of position, starting from the party's margins but also possessing some emblematic institutional enclaves fundamentally Teresa Rodríguez, general secretary of Andalusia, Miguel Urbán, European Parliament member, and other local general secretaries. Its institutional weight increased by the May 2015 elections when several members won seats in regional parliaments.

Anticapitalistas then focused on two interrelated tasks: on the one hand, to galvanize opposition without the ability to defeat Iglesias and Errejón's policy; on the other, to put another Podemos into practice where an internal majority would allow it, something the party's organizational, political, and hegemonic framework made very hard to do. The first involved fighting the present to win the future; the second, bringing the future to the present.

Finally, the explosion of the Iglesias-Errejón partnership last March opened a new phase for Anticapitalistas, marked by its increasing normalization inside Podemos and the end of the anti-dissident atmosphere created at Vistalegre I. In this new period, the challenge has been to build a third, independent way in the midst of enormous polarization. Having more than achieved its objectives at Vistalegre II, the Anticapitalistas now begin another stage: another Podemos will serve as a permanent mirror to reflect the tactical and strategic debates of the real Podemos.

Throughout this more than two-year journey, Anticapitalistas faced the challenge of staying true to its own hypotheses while interacting with the populist hypothesis to confront the weak points of its own strategic conceptions. Among the most important issues, they considered ways of relating to society and transcending the cultural codes of the activist and militant milieu. The behavior and proposals inside Podemos by Anticapitalistas have been the result of a creative tension between its fidelity to its own project and historical background and its interaction with the party's populist project.

After the Deluge

The Podemos that emerged out of Vistalegre II is a modified version of the bureaucratic-communicative electoral war machine established in 2014. Its first task is to complete internal restructuring and displace Errejón's old political apparatus. He once served as the capo of an inflexible apparatus that struck down anyone who got in his way; now, he will find out how the machine he built really works.

Although there is a certain poetic justice in seeing the main architect of the bureaucratic war machine devoured by his own creation, this does not mean that measures to suppress pluralist culture in the party must be supported. Logically, Iglesias's team will take over the central functions of the party's leadership and dismantle the factional political apparatus that Errejón built.

But this should not be confused with maintaining an anti-pluralist culture that only superficially integrates minorities in the executive leadership. Without shedding any tears for Errejón and his cronies, who led the party with cold and relentless authoritarianism, we must still mount a strong defense for internal plurality, for the right of minorities to participate in the elected bodies, and for democratic respect for the diversity of opinions and positions.

The new Podemos will likely begin to combine strong plebeian rhetoric with moderate programmatic proposals aimed at gaining respectability. The party's swerves and excesses will continue. In fact, the results of factional struggles always have paradoxical elements, especially when the price of victory for the winners is high. It is not uncommon for the surviving faction to assume part of its opponent's political line, now under its own control. This may happen in Podemos, where Iglesias, as we have already pointed out, never had a strategic corpus besides Errejonismo. Universally recognized as the bad guy in the story, Iglesias may require a dose of Errejonian kindness to alleviate the media pressure, which wants to present Vistalegre II as a Podemos retreat.

In any case, acting as the main opposition to the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government does not present many intrinsic difficulties. Iglesias will handle it predictably by combining his rebellious rhetoric with support for social struggles. For the short term, he has firmly held onto his position at least until the next general elections. Unless against all predictions he plunges in the polls, hardly anyone will be able to move him from his throne. But if he fails at the next election, his position will no doubt become very weak.

Podemos's future remains uncertain. The hardest moments have probably passed. In June, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) will face its own battle to elect a new leadership, a result that will surely affect Podemos's future. Pedro Sanchez, the former PSOE general secretary who was forced to resign last October for refusing to back Mariano Rajoy's right-wing government, will try to win back control. If he fails, the current PSOE leadership plans to continue to back Rajoy, thus leaving a real political void that Podemos can fill.

The show of the past weeks has damaged Podemos, which already seems guilty of the same vices as any other political party. Despite this, its electoral base should more or less stabilize. Even in its current state, Podemos still represents the best political-electoral vehicle for millions to express their social unrest against the traditional parties,

PP and PSOE, and their new crutch, Ciudadanos. But a party like Podemos works better with a committed social base than with a demotivated vote.

In any case, beyond Podemos's possible successes and mistakes, the decisive variable will be whether or not a new cycle of social struggles begins. Spain needs new waves of struggle to finish the period 15-M began and to display all of its potential. In connection with Podemos and the other left-wing forces, this new cycle can become political.

This article was originally published in [Viento Sur](#) and translated by [Jacobin](#).

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