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Spanish state

Spanish state: a revived Eurocommunism vs centrist populism

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A few days after the public announcement [on 17 January] that an agreement had been reached between the Mayor of Madrid, Manuela Carmena, and Álex Guler around the platform Más Madrid for the forthcoming municipal elections, as well as the scathing response from Pablo Iglesias (not to mention that of his organisational secretary, Pablo Echenique), it is evident that the Podemos we have known over the last five years has come to an end.

We are going to see another Podemos from now on, probably condemned to represent only one political current, one that is closely associated with “Pabloism”. [1] In parallel, a neo-populism of the centre is emerging – which could be close to what the German Greens or the Italian 5-star movement represent – which will continue to claim the label of the original Podemos.

It is appropriate for those who, like us, do not identify with either of these projects, to open a new space to the left of them. We hope, in so doing, to offer a distinct path and able to embody a constituent horizon of rupture: a democratic, pluralistic and anti-neoliberal, feminist, anti-racist and eco-socialist alternative, which will facilitate joint work and the cooperation of a broad activist spectrum, capable of gaining electoral support from a broad sector of those at the bottom, opposed to austerity and authoritarian abuses.

Clearly, the election results in Andalusia, as well as the reactionary turn indicated by the polls for the elections of 26 May 2019, precipitated the decision by Álex Guler. [2] The latter finally convinced himself that he had to break with Pablo Iglesias and his team. He also knew that he could count on the support of Manuela Carmena to give credibility to his project as the only way to curb the rise of the reactionary bloc.

Grandeur and decadence of a failed model

How did we get here when, in recent times, the policy in relation to the PSOE followed by the current general secretary of Podemos was practically the same as that proposed by Guler at the Congress of Vistalegre II? [3] Pablo Iglesias had even come to accept that the enemy is no longer the regime, and IBEX 35 [4] but only the reactionary bloc? But if this is effectively so, there are still differences between the two currents in the rhetoric they use to reach new sectors and, above all, with regard to their evaluation of the recent erosion of the Podemos trademark.

Let's start with “Pabloism”. If we take, for example, the documents and practices after the end of its cycle of growing success, we could conclude that this current represents a political project that draws its references from the Eurocommunism of the late 1970s. A good indication of this lies in the correction of the criticisms that Pablo Iglesias had made of the post-Franco transition – as well as the role played by Santiago Carrillo in this process – clearly stating that they “did what they could” and that they demonstrated their sense of governmental responsibility. Starting from this turn and an understanding of the end of the cycle opened in 2011 by the movement of the Indignado/as (15M), Iglesias deduced the need to give priority to the aspiration to be a “party of government” without concealing his “obsession to govern”, as he acknowledged in his conversation with Enric Juliana in his recent book. [5] The willingness to govern with the PSOE under this regime replaces the project of a break with the system which led to the birth of Podemos, wishing to present itself as the institutional expression of the spirit of the indignant and which, immediately after the European elections of May 2014, set up an “electoral war machine” aimed at initiating a “lightning war”.

From the frustration of aspirations to “storm the heavens”, with a populist project based on a party model around a charismatic leader and on plebiscitary democracy, he has moved, especially since Vistalegre II, to an increasing adaptation to the conventional left-right axis, the PSOE being seen as the main ally to be “seduced”. The end (for now) of this course appears in the role played by Iglesias as a mediator with the Catalan pro-independence forces in the negotiation of the general budget of the state... in the name of Pedro Sánchez.

This “obsession to govern” is evident in the book quoted, for although Pablo Iglesias reaffirms his refusal to allow Pedro Sánchez to form a government on the basis of a pact with Ciudadanos after the elections of December 2015 (unlike what Errejón thought and still thinks), the only self-criticism that can be seen in his balance sheet is that Podemos did not enter the governments of the autonomous communities of the Valencian country or Aragon, while he expresses satisfaction that the party has entered the government of Castile-La Mancha. This is a government chaired by a baron of the PSOE, who conceals neither his sympathy for Ciudadanos nor his eagerness to outlaw Catalan independence.

We have not read or heard any self-criticism, which would be largely justified, from the leader of Podemos regarding the party model, which is ultra-centralized, hierarchical and represses any dissent, nor of attempts to instrumentalize certain social mobilizations or, finally, inventions such as Vamos. [6]

To justify his obsession to govern, Pablo Iglesias does not hesitate to point to the Portuguese example, presenting it for what he is not. He aspires to “normalize a way of governing through a coalition formula in municipalities and autonomous communities that resembles the Portuguese style.” However, as he is well aware, what exists in the country next door is a governmental investiture agreement that has allowed forces like the Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc) to preserve its autonomy and freedom of criticism in relation to the Socialist Party.

To this strategic turn, which implies, as the leader of Podemos points out, a “pragmatism on many levels”, we can add the growing decline of the leadership of Iglesias and the profound internal crises in several autonomous communities, and there remains little doubt that Podemos has lost its centralizing role and ability to be an engine of convergences. To all this is added the definitive bureaucratization of a party whose activist base is gradually shrinking, and which is increasingly associated with a new “political class”, now preoccupied with its own future. For this reason, the book mentioned states that “the circles are a clear indication that we do not want to build a traditional membership party” (op. cit. page 149) which has a cynical flavour when everyone knows that the circles are today very often in a state of advanced decomposition (when they have not just disappeared) in most regions.

This story is reminiscent of the internal crises that the PCE suffered in the 1980-1982 period, when the PSOE of “change” managed to occupy a broad political space at the expense of what had formerly been the main party of anti-Francoism, and which could happen again now if the Carmena-Errejón tandem obtains good election results.

Nevertheless, in what Iglesias says about this new stage there are two not unimportant questions that differentiate him from the Eurocommunism of Santiago Carrillo, and also from the discourse of Errejón. One is the place he gives to the defence, however ambiguous, of the idea of a pluri-national Spain and the need for a negotiated referendum in Catalonia. Along with his rejection of the application of article 155 and the accusations of revolt and sedition directed against the Catalan pro-independence forces, this is an important issue, because it concerns a major breach of the regime and the State, and on that he does not seem prepared to retreat. But let us not delude ourselves, it will probably be in the future an increasingly rhetorical defence and not a red line when negotiating a hypothetical governmental agreement with the PSOE.

The other differentiation is the recent decision to introduce in his discourse a critique of the role played by King Felipe VI, especially following his televised speech of 3 October 2017, resorting to the weak argument that the monarchy had served to curb the coup of 23 February 1981 (sic), but now this brake is no longer useful... [7] Thus, given the

emergence of a new popular republicanism, the defence of the republican option has come to the fore. This contrasts with the silence on this issue - as well as on that of historical memory - that the Podemos leadership team maintained in the past and that Errejón continues to maintain.

These two questions, coupled with the Bonapartist vocation that the leader intends to pursue between institutional pressures and those that can emanate from mobilizations in a context of political polarization (as we have just seen in the vote against the government decree on rents), show that Podemos is still seen as a party that the regime cannot integrate. It is not surprising, therefore, that despite its evolution, big business, and thus the majority of the media, remain wary of the party of Iglesias. Their goal, shared by the PSOE, is to reduce the image of Podemos to that previously held by Izquierda Unida, thus reducing its ability to govern other than as a crutch for Pedro Sánchez's party.

Given the contradictions of some parts of his discourse and his willingness to be a "party of government" alongside the PSOE, and Iglesias's desire to ensure a direct control (although he does not always succeed, as we have seen in Andalusia) on Unidos Podemos and on its official discourse, it is understandable that Iñigo Errejón decided to free himself from this burden and to co-fly with Manuela Carmena in order to react to what happened in Andalusia with a project that "renews hope and confidence".

A question of branding?

Faced with the erosion of the Podemos brand, Iñigo Errejón offers us Más Madrid as the only alternative capable of winning more people around a discourse that also goes beyond the left-right axis in order to aspire to a universality without red lines allowing them to govern the Community and the municipality of Madrid... with the PSOE. If, as we are told in the letter by Carmena and Errejón, their programme will be based on the "continuity of the government of change in the municipality and an extension of its example to the Community of Madrid", there is little illusion to be had in a project that will have to justify operations like Madrid-Chamartín [\[8\]](#) as well as authoritarian practices within the Ahora Madrid group. It is true that they promise us "a joint and participatory programme", but experience in the city of Madrid leads to well-founded fears that this time what they seek from the electorate is a blank cheque so that two people can put "good management" before participatory programmes and processes such as those that enabled Carmena to win the Madrid council, and which she has abandoned on fundamental points in recent years.

For this reason, this project seems to us far from the good wishes that Santiago Alba recently addressed to the new formation, while warning that an "intergenerational charisma will not suffice; a programme to the left of the PSOE will also be necessary as well as a diametrically opposite style to that of Podemos." [\[9\]](#) In this article Santiago Alba Rico, who had signed (along with Jaime Pastor, among others) the collective manifesto of 14 January "Changing gears: transforming indignation into political change", expresses his agreements and disagreements with two of his "anti-capitalist comrades", generally supporting the Carmena-Errejón project.]] This is not what has interested Carmena or Errejón so far, whether in terms of programme or the recognition of internal plurality. Let us remember that in the past Errejón was ready to let the PSOE govern through a programme negotiated with Ciudadanos and it does not seem that he is ruling out an agreement with this same party if this is a condition to govern the Madrid Community with the PSOE, as some polls indicate. As for their relationship with other forces, what is required is conditional adherence to a project tailored to a management team that admits no criticism, because it believes itself to be alone capable of winning.

This is also a project which, moreover, could be extended in the future to the entire Spanish state with the same formula everywhere (Más Spain?) and which, as we have already begun to observe, tends increasingly to adapt to the framework and even to symbolic elements of dominant Spanish nationalism rather than to recognise the pluri-national reality and the right to self-determination of our peoples.

Looking for solutions

Although Podemos is finished as the engine of change we have no hope that Más Madrid – despite potentially better election results, because of its drift towards a “democratic progressive” bloc with undefined contours –will take over. This means the sectors that continue to identify with the spirit of the movement of the *Indignad@s* and the manifesto from which Podemos emerged [10] together with the new layers coming from the emerging social activism, must take up the mantle, adopting another path, that of collective deliberation, of respect for plurality and proportionality, of popular emancipation in order to rely on models of city and autonomous community that do not yield to pressures from the financial-real estate bloc.

We know that engaging in this path will be more difficult in a radically different context, but it is even more indispensable if we want to avoid resignation or false illusions about the “new” policies of the lesser evil as a way forward to deal with the reactionary threat. Such illusions eventually lead to broader frustrations, as we have seen in other countries.

We have sufficient proof that charismatic leadership, which quickly became authoritarian, over the last five years has distanced us from the *Indignad@s* movement and has led to the worst forms of the old politics. We must convince ourselves that, as our dear friend Miguel Romero put it in August 2013, “no leader can substitute for a programme, in which the social majority recognizes itself and which shares the diversity of demands that make it possible to establish an antagonistic social camp in the face of established power. A social camp which, in the Spanish state, it is not useless to repeat, must equally articulate between different national realities”. [11]

Madrid, 23 January 2019

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[1] From Iglesias's first name, rather than the historic Trotskyist current thus called.

[2] There will be elections in May for the European parliament, as well as municipal and autonomous community elections (for 13 of the 17 communities). A summary of surveys conducted for various media as of February 11, 2019 gives the following results: PSOE 24.0%, PP 21.0%, Ciudadanos 19.1%, Unidos Podemos 15.2% and Vox 11.6%.

[3] Josep Maria Antentas “[Power in Podemos](#)”.

[4] IBEX 35 is the stock market index of the Madrid Stock Exchange, bringing together the 35 richest companies.

[5] *Nudo España*, p. 321. Enric Juliana is deputy director of *La Vanguardia*, the country's second largest daily newspaper by circulation, published in Barcelona in Castilian (and since 2011 also in Catalan) with a conservative and Catalan orientation.

[6] *Vamos* was an aborted attempt to construct a semblance of local implantation, around demands relating to popular needs, which was supposed to culminate in demonstrations on 25 March 2017.

[7] Wikipedia “[Spanish coup d'état attempt](#)”.

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[8] See Luis Suárez Carreño's article on this speculative real estate transaction, "[El caso Madrid-Chamartín. La ciudad usurpada](#)", Viento sur, 21 January 2019.

[9] *ctxt* #204 16 January 2019, "[Más Madrid, menos Podemos](#)".

[10] Known as "Mover ficha: convertir la indignación en cambio político" ([Podemos Manifiesto](#)), this collective manifesto of 14 January 2014 was at the origin of Podemos. Jaime Pastor was one of the signatories, unlike Íñigo Errejón and Pablo Iglesias.

[11] *Viento Sur*, 4 August 2013 Miguel Romero, "[Desvío Al Iá-der](#)".