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Spanish State - Podemos: party of struggles or populist operation from above?

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The trajectory of Podemos, an organization that emerged from the Indignados movement in the Spanish state, gives some indications of the possible trajectory of radical left currents in France. As a political force, Podemos is a very contradictory phenomenon, with different tendencies that have disputed the political line from the beginning, and which has therefore been in permanent crisis. Hence it is often perceived in a very contradictory way by outside observers: an example of a party-movement operating in parliament for some; a highly centralized media operation around a leadership group for others.

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The truth is that the two coexisted within Podemos, and the creative tension between these two realities accounted in part for its initial success. But the two “souls” have fought a very unequal war to the death, ending up with defeat for one of them as well as the original project.

Born from mobilizations, with strong internal contradictions

Podemos emerged in 2014 after a cycle of social struggles that began with the emergence of the Indignados movement in 2011. This process of popular mobilization had shown that large sections of the population were breaking with the two major traditional parties, and it expressed a rejection of the economic policies that had developed after the 2008 crisis. The movement, which was part of a global cycle of mobilizations, also allowed thousands of people to experiment with new forms of participation and political and social action: occupations of squares, popular assemblies, use of social networks as a means of expression and organization and so on. We have also seen the emergence of slogans and demands with broad popular support: against corruption, against neoliberal economic policies, for the renewal of the political system, defence of public services including education and health.

Podemos set itself the goal of giving electoral political expression to this movement. But, even if it has often been perceived as its emanation, in fact it has never been organically linked to the Indignados movement and originated rather from the initiative of a small group of activists who, in alliance with Izquierda Anticapitalista (now Anticapitalistas), launched the project.

The launch of Podemos

The initial launch of Podemos in January 2014 presented itself as a citizens' initiative which, in continuity with the struggles of 2011-2014, intended to make the voice of the social majorities heard in the political field. It therefore presented itself as an organization different from all political parties, a kind of democratic tool with horizontal functioning, allowing a kind of direct democracy in the electoral context. Podemos took up the most popular slogans of the period, with a clearly radical program of rupture with neoliberalism and the regime of the 1978 Constitution.

The call to form "circles" or self-managed rank-and-file committees, to build the electoral campaign from below, was a remarkable success and made it possible to launch a fairly massive campaign with extremely limited resources. Podemos' success was also based on the popularity of its spokesperson, Pablo Iglesias, who became known for his participation in televised political debates, first organized by himself and then as a guest of right-wing media. The popularity of Iglesias made it possible to give a visible figure to the project, with which people could easily identify.

However, this aspect also carried the risk of centralization around one person of the future organization. Indeed, Iglesias and those around him used it to ensure full control of all formal decision-making processes, adopted by electronic voting by the mass of members. From the beginning, the possibility of joining Podemos without even paying a membership fee or attending a meeting made it possible to reach hundreds of thousands of people interested in the project. But this massive membership also created a party base much broader than that of activists organized in circles, but far less active and less involved in party-building debates.

Vistalegre, the founding congress

These contradictions exploded in the preparation of the first congress, or "citizens' assembly" according to the language of Podemos. Debates on forms of organization give rise to various proposals on how to build a new force allowing a radical democracy with a certain degree of centralization and efficiency. Anticapitalistas worked with many others to synthesize these proposals, federating local groups with diverse ideas, but animated by the common project of a democratic activist force.

In reaction to this, Iglesias followed a quite simple tactic: he presented a firm position with a system of organization designed to remove any role from the rank-and-file assemblies and give the secretary general unlimited power in the election of local councils, done by electronic vote. His argument was reduced, as the vote approached and the result seemed uncertain, to simple blackmail: if this system was not validated, he would withdraw as spokesperson for the future organization.

These two proposals clashed at the congress. While in face-to-face meetings things seemed equal, the final decision was made online by the hundreds of thousands of members that Podemos already had at the time (November 2014). Iglesias's project was adopted, that of a party with disproportionate power for the executive, validating its orientations by internal plebiscites, and with an intermediate structure which was virtually non-existent and built from above.

This congress will be remembered for the phrase in Iglesias' speech that he used to attack the alternative position: "Heaven is not taken by consensus, it is taken by assault". Against the inclusive deliberative processes that animated most Podemos activists, the authority of the leader imposing himself internally was invoked, based on the prospect of a rapid (electoral) victory. It was also an implicit break with the spirit of the Indignados movement, which had privileged horizontal,

consensual methods, expressed in the slogan of the Puerta del Sol plaza: “We go slowly because we go far”.

Since these methods of debate led to moments of inefficiency and frustration, the principle of consensus as the only means of decision-making had often been replaced in assemblies by broad majority voting procedures. But the spirit of Podemos presented by Iglesias was a drastic break with all this. With the objective of winning the general elections quickly, made credible by good scores in the polls, the choice of an “electoral war machine” party was made, which completely eliminated any deliberative and inclusive process. In fact, the construction of the party after the founding congress involved a fierce struggle against the self-managed circles and their activists, and their replacement by local “councils” effectively chosen from above and validated by electronic vote. This war against the circles often hid behind a war against Anticapitalistas, with a half-sincere half-feigned paranoia about our infiltration into the rank-and-file assemblies (fortunately for the circles, they were much bigger than us and we had extremely limited means to influence them locally).

Podemos was soon transformed into an empty shell, focused on its parliamentary and institutional apparatus with all power emanating from the Secretary General and his entourage. Years later, Iglesias acknowledged the “mistake” of killing the circles, and they tried to rebuild a party structure with activist participation. But the possibility of creating a new force, which would integrate the most active and dynamic elements of our social camp, had long been wasted.

What role for Anticapitalistas?

The bitter outcome of the founding congress forced Anticapitalistas to rethink its role in Podemos, which bore no resemblance to the new force we had imagined, a party-movement, radically democratic and militant. However, we chose to stay, based on the progressive role that Podemos continued to play in Spanish politics, the expectations of millions of workers in this new project, and a certain degree of agreement with the leadership on the need for a break with the Spanish political and economic system and the need for a constituent process. It was clear to us that we had a quite different idea about what form such a process should take, and that these strategic differences would lead to a break at some point, but we chose to continue working together trying to make our ideas and methods heard.

The lack of internal democracy of the new organization has made even more obvious to us the need to combine participation within it with our own construction as an independent revolutionary organization, with its own political profile and total autonomy, including financial autonomy, in relation to Podemos and the institutional positions obtained by participating in the lists presented in the elections.

At the beginning of 2020, when Iglesias and his followers joined the coalition government with the Socialist Party, we decided to leave Podemos definitively. We waited for a moment of historical inflection, understandable by the masses, which effectively showed that Podemos had become incapable of embodying a project of rupture. Anticapitalistas came out strengthened from this experience, both numerically and by the experience of having led this battle unitarily.

What effect has Podemos had on popular mobilizations?

The irruption of Podemos into the parliamentary institutions made possible a generational renewal of elected representatives, illustrated by the famous image of the deputy with dreadlocks in front of

the sluggish gaze of President Rajoy. Some of these new deputies were originally representatives of social struggles or left-wing activists linked to them. This has undoubtedly allowed a greater visibility of workers' struggles, feminists, for public services or for the rights of immigrants, who have thus been able to make themselves heard in the institutions.

However, the strategy of the Podemos leadership was based on a strong principle of delegation, which transferred all activist efforts to the electoral level, and placed all hopes on the importance of the leaders, who became parliamentary representatives, then government representatives. This consolidation of Podemos has therefore also contributed to a great demobilization and the end of the cycle of struggles.

The integration of Podemos into the coalition government has only accentuated this phenomenon: once all autonomy has been lost due to agreements within the government, Podemos is even less able to represent an alternative voice and express the more radical expectations of change that emanate from social struggles and movements.

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P.S.

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