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Podemos: the ambiguous promises of left-wing populism in contemporary Spain

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ABSTRACT

The paper inquires critically into Podemos as an instance of left-wing populism in contemporary European politics, putting forward four claims and a major thesis. First, Podemos was started as an original endeavour to ally in a hybrid mix two divergent approaches to democratic politics: the *horizontal*, open and networked mobilizations of the multitude, and the *vertical*, hierarchical, formal and representative structures of party formations, on the other. Such an amalgam might serve to combine the virtues of different models of democracy. Second, Podemos' populism exemplifies a creative version of a 'politics of the common', but the terms of the 'common sense' are inflected in the direction of social rights, inclusion and egalitarian democracy. Third, Podemos illustrates a unique 'reflexivity' in the pursuit of populism. The party leadership has taken its cues from E. Laclau's hegemonic theory of populism and implements it in its political strategy. Fourth, since the autumn of 2014, Podemos has arguably seen the gradual preponderance of a vertical, 'hegemonic' logic, reflecting a particular reading of populist theory which is prevalent among the party's leadership. The broader thesis is that a dualist politics, which welds together horizontalism and verticalism in a conflictual bind, is a *prima facie* plausible strategy for renewing democracy in the present critical context. But a political organization like Podemos will be able to redeem its democratic promises as long as it maintains a constructive balance between these two political logics, avoiding the reassertion of centralized leadership and the suppression of pluralism which are typical of the populist tradition.

Along with the Greek SYRIZA, the fledgling Podemos in Spain represents one of the two peaks of a new wave of left-wing populism which has surged forth in contemporary Europe, mainly in the crisis-hit South, effectively contesting general elections and winning

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power. After its eruption in early 2014 and its success in the May 2014 European Elections, Podemos witnessed a meteoric rise in popularity until the end of 2014, when this was stabilized and started to decline. In early 2015, Podemos was still competing with three other parties (PP, PSOE and Ciudadanos) for the lead in the polls, in the run up to the Spanish regional and general elections.

Like SYRIZA, Podemos gives the lie to the conventional wisdom of European political science on the topic of contemporary European populism, which is stereotypically cast as reactionary, nationalist, xenophobic, exclusionary and anti-European.[1] Both party formations embrace the project of a politically integrated and solidary Europe, they defend immigrants and socially marginalized sectors, they press a strong social rights agenda, they target not only political but also economic and social elites and they claim to fight for popular sovereignty, social justice and democratization.[2] Moreover, they deliberately enunciate a populist discourse and they pursue a populist political strategy understood in Ernesto Laclau's terms.

Accordingly, this paper sets out to inquire critically into Podemos as an instance of left-wing populism in contemporary European politics. We begin by situating Podemos' populism in the context of 'post-political governmentality' and the crisis of representation in liberal democracies, which is common to different variants of left-wing populist politics from Venezuela to Greece, and we grasp its populist discourse as a more widely attested form of speech and practice, drawing on Laclau. But the article then goes on to engage with the singularities of Podemos' populism in order to assess the democratic promises it holds out, putting forward four claims in this regard and a major thesis.

First, Podemos was started as an original endeavour to ally in a hybrid mix two divergent approaches to democratic politics: the *horizontal*, open, diverse, networked and assembly based mobilizations of the multitude on the streets and the web, on the one hand, and the *vertical*, hierarchical, unified, formal and representative structures of party formations, on the other. Such an amalgam could serve to combine the virtues of different models of democracy, boosting grassroots participation while simultaneously achieving strategic coherence, efficiency, majoritarian support and inroads into electoral politics and institutions. Second, Podemos' populism exemplifies a creative version of a 'politics of the common.' Political representation opens up to the 'common people' and political discourse resonates with the 'common sense' of social majorities beyond the left–right divide. But the terms of this 'common sense' are inflected in the direction of social rights, inclusion and egalitarian democratic change.

Third, Podemos illustrates a unique 'reflexivity' in the pursuit of populism. The party leadership has taken its cues from Laclau's hegemonic theory of populism and implements it in its political strategy. The fourth, related claim is that, since the autumn of 2014, Podemos has arguably seen the gradual preponderance of a vertical, 'hegemonic' logic over its horizontal and multitudinous dynamics, reflecting a particular reading of populist theory which is prevalent among the party's intellectual leadership and assigns a decisive emphasis to the leader. We will make the case, then, that another interpretation of the theory of hegemony is tenable and, perhaps, more constructive. This one sustains a productive tension between the logics of hegemony and autonomy rather than subsuming autonomy under hegemony in a way that alienates grassroots activists and risks re-enacting the kind of elitist politics which has eroded liberal democracy in Spain.

The broader thesis advanced here is that a dualist politics, which welds together horizontalism and verticalism, or autonomy and hegemony, in a conflictual bind, is a *prima facie* plausible strategy for renewing democracy in the present critical context. But a political organization like Podemos will be able to redeem its democratic promises – enhanced social control, transparency and participation in democratic governance – as long as it maintains a constructive balance between these two political logics, avoiding the reassertion of centralized leadership and the suppression of pluralism which are so typical of the populist tradition and signal its authoritarian trends.[3]

Post-politics and Populist Discourse

Over the last five years, the trajectory of democratic politics in Spain displays clear affinities with socio-political developments in other European as well as Latin American contexts (notably, Venezuela since the late 1980s and Greece since 2010, among other examples). Spanish society was likewise afflicted by a severe crisis of the liberal-democratic consensus that had prevailed in the previous two decades. The regime that was put in place after the fall of Franco's dictatorship in 1978 and its so-called 'Transition culture,' which was built around the new Spanish constitution, has undergone the same 'post-democratic' unravelling that beset Venezuelan and Greek politics.[4] The alternation of a centre-left and a centre-right party in power, the demobilization of citizens, the avoidance of deep political conflict, clientelism and revolving doors between administration and corporations marked the '1978 regime.' But, this has witnessed since the 1990s a further 'post-democratic' turn through the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties on neoliberalism, the gradual ossification of institutions, the increasing irresponsiveness of political elites to social demands, the widespread corruption, and the rising disaffection of popular majorities with formal representative democracy and the entire 1978 settlement. Popular discontent has only been exacerbated in recent years as a consequence of the way ruling elites have managed the economic crisis since 2008, dealing another blow to the hegemonic social consensus and the regime it underpinned.[5]

The popular '15 M' movement, which spread across Spain in May 2011, convened citizens' assemblies on central squares and debated participatory democratic alternatives to neoliberalism and the 1978 regime. 15 M voiced the widespread sentiment of asphyxiation and collective outrage at the depletion of democracy and material impoverishment. The *Indignados* movement transfigured the political 'common sense,' pitting the majority of the citizens against the political and financial elites, calling the political oligarchy to account for the crisis and dismissing political representation, either totally or in its present guises. They demanded, instead, effective popular control over democratic government with a view to establishing a 'real democracy.'

This collective mobilization, which was later dispersed and channelled into local assemblies and new massive protests in defence of public goods, has enjoyed to date majoritarian cross-sectional support among Spanish citizens. The 15 M has left a strong imprint on political culture, diffusing its sharp critique of the status quo and aggravating its crisis of legitimation, projecting lay people as the sovereign agent in democratic politics and disseminating aspirations to popular participation. The movement has failed however to change the social balance of power effectively, to gain leverage on government and to initiate a new democratic institutionality on sustainable terms. Institutions have remained largely

impervious to the demands for popular sovereignty, for a downward redistribution of wealth and for the protection of welfare rights and political liberties.[6]

At this juncture, certain social actors started searching for new vehicles of political representation that would overcome the fragmentation and the political impotence of the multitudes, organizing them and gaining access to power. Moreover, by 'occupying representation,' such political agencies could facilitate social mobilizations, making the state apparatus amenable to their influence and halting repressive policies. The opportunity could then open up to renew democracy in ways that address the institutional grounds of the elitist deviations, promoting rule by citizens and crafting improved forms of political representation. Agitation and protest might thus give way to a new institutional phase that could meet some of their demands and consolidate part of their political achievements. This was precisely the diagnosis and the agenda endorsed by a sector of social actors who were engaged in several citizens' initiatives in 2014, such as PAH [*Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*], Ganemos and Podemos. They opted for hybrid schemes of action and structure in order both to uphold grassroots mobilization and to pursue centralized coordination, electoral politics and institutional intervention.[7] Podemos, more specifically, drew its demands and its participatory methodology from the *Indignados* and later social protests. But, Podemos intended to construct a wider 'popular unity' by reaching out to social majorities who agree with the narrative and the demands of the movements but are not interested in their direct democratic practice and are happy to delegate political responsibility.[8]

Like the Venezuelan Chavismo and the Greek SYRIZA, the Spanish Podemos was thus a response to a crisis of political representation, as populism often is. More specifically, all three examples illustrate a particular 'scenario for the rise of populism', whereby established 'cartel parties … appear to form a closed, self-interested and self-reproducing governing caste that is insulated from popular needs and concerns …. [and is attached to a] technocratic consensus behind market liberalization policies'.[9] In addition to this common background – the organic crisis of liberal representation and the trajectory from a popular outrage that fails to configure a new political reality to the search for new collective representatives – the three parties/movements also share a similar populist logic, which can be grasped in the terms put forward by Ernesto Laclau.

What defines populism in Laclau's formal-structural approach is, essentially: (1) 'the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the "people" from power',[10] (2) the creation of a chain of equivalence among popular demands that are left unsatisfied by those in power; this equivalence is produced by virtue of common 'empty signifiers' which name collectively, unify and represent the chain of demands, (3) the 'people' of populism is represented as an excluded and underprivileged plebeian mass which claims to be the only legitimate community, a universal subject identified with the totality of the community.[11]

'Populism' is a notoriously contentious and elusive term of political discourse.[12] However, in recent years, there has been a growing consensus among scholars that populism should be construed in minimal, 'thin' terms which abstract from the particular contents of populist demands and mobilizations.[13] The substance of populist politics appears widely divergent (from right-wing and xenophobic to egalitarian, socialist etc.), impeding the identification of a common ideational core among all phenomena which have been placed under the label 'populist'. Hence the turn to formal-structural definitions of populism which foreground the appeal to the people as the foundation of legitimate power, and the opposition to elites who have purportedly oppressed or exploited the people.[14]

Ernesto Laclau's work provides a highly pertinent template for an exegesis of Podemos' populism, first, because it represents a systematic endeavour to work out a formal analysis of populism along the foregoing lines. Second, Laclau's theory has functioned as a guide for the thought and the strategy of Podemos' leadership, giving a reflexive inflection to their populist politics which will be critically explored below. Finally, Laclau's conception of populist *hegemony* posits a coalescence between diverse autonomous mobilizations and vertical coordination, precisely of the kind that we can discern in Podemos' hybrid political organization.

At the core of Podemos' discourse, then, lies the antagonistic divide which characterizes populism from a formal-structural perspective: the antagonism between the social majority and the privileged minority. This displaces and replaces the divide between left and right. The social majority, designated variously as 'el pueblo', 'la gente', 'la mayoria social', 'la ciudadania,' is portrayed as suffering from impoverishment and exclusion from a democracy which is 'hijacked' by elites, and it is opposed to the 'casta' which rules the regime and appropriates its benefits.[15] A plurality of social demands emerging from the economic crisis and the neoliberal policies of the state – vindicating the right to employment, housing, social protection, health, education, the cancellation of unjust debt, the end of austerity policies, the restoration of popular sovereignty – are made equivalent and brought together in a single chain of equivalence around the 'empty signifier' of 'democracy' ('construir la democracia') and the charismatic figure of Pablo Iglesias.[16] The third component of a populist configuration à la Laclau is also evidently present. Podemos strives to manufacture a 'popular unity' or a new 'national-popular will' and to 'recuperate politics' for the distressed majority, the 'plebs', in order to put public institutions in the service of the common good. The objective of Podemos is, in other words, to achieve an identification of the 'plebs' with the universal 'populus' of the country.[17]

The affinities of Podemos with the left-wing populism of Chavismo and SYRIZA extend much further. First, in the affective register, the message of Podemos seeks to attract massive support by stimulating feelings of joy and hope ('ilusión'), by striving for 'victory' and by inspiring confidence in the possibility of imminent rupture and change.[18] Second, as opposed to what happens in right-wing populism, the feelings of anger and fear nourished by precarity are projected onto the domestic 'casta' rather than on immigrants. Moreover, the anti-establishment sentiment is directed not only against corrupt political oligarchies, but also against economic elites, and it is wedded to a project of social justice.[19] Finally, the figure of the leader, his discourse, his intensive mediatic presence and his charisma have likewise been a catalyst in the process of building the party and constructing a wider popular front. Appearing in multiple media and hosting his own TV programmes, Pablo Iglesias employs a plain language that communicates his message in an approachable and exciting way, offering a coherent and 'common sense' narrative for the causes of the crisis and the prospects of change, which can supply a common surface of inscription for various social discontents and diverse identities.[20]

The Singularities of Podemos: Dualism, the 'Common' and Reflexivity

The 'democratic promise' contained in various instances of left-wing populism today lies primarily in their intent to provide an institutional representation to a widespread popular disaffection with representative regimes in deep crisis, and to do so in ways that purportedly

further social inclusion, justice and collective empowerment. To assess this promise in the case of Podemos, it is necessary to address the aspects that single out Podemos as an example of arguably progressive democratic populism.

To help grasp these distinctive traits, one should highlight from the outset certain formative influences that lie at the origins of Podemos. Iñigo Errejón, the director of its electoral campaign in the 2014 European elections, has identified three pillars: the effect of the 15 M movement on Spanish political culture; the intensive use of media outlets by Podemos' leadership, crucially of their own TV programmes such as 'La Tuerka' and 'Fort Apache', through which they shaped a popular discourse that could reach out to a wider public; and their extended study and direct experience of political developments in Latin American countries, such as Venezuela and Bolivia. In these societies, new national-popular majorities were formed in the last 15 years, catapulting left-wing leaders and parties into power and initiating processes of rupture and constitutional change.[21] To these influences, one should add the past involvement of Pablo Iglesias and Juan C. Monedero in communist organizations, including *Izquierda Unida,* the mainstream leftist party in contemporary Spain. Iglesias and Errejón also took part in activist movements up to and including *Juventud sin Futur*, one of the incubators of the 15 M protests.[22]

a. Dualism

To begin with, if contemporary debates around the meaning of the 'populism' 'centre precisely on this question of "power to the people" … – in particular, whether these subjects can be self-constituted and mobilized "from below," or whether populism refers more narrowly to the top-down mobilization, by dominant personalities',[23] Podemos' original response is: both simultaneously. No doubt, the fusion between 'participatory' and 'plebiscitary' linkages between mass constituencies and political agencies that claim to empower them is not unique to this Spanish party formation. Among other examples, President Chávez instituted diverse channels for grassroots communal participation and decision-making, and SYRIZA has closely engaged with social mobilizations throughout its history.[24] However, Podemos' relationship with radical movements and direct, collective participation is more organic and intimate than anything found in the foregoing.

First, the emergence of the new Spanish formation has been facilitated and influenced by the 15 M movement and the mutations in political culture that have been triggered by the latter: the critique of the political and financial elites as the main culprits for the crisis, the protagonism of the people in opposition to the elites, the displacement of the left/right divide with an antagonism between citizens and the political and financial establishment, the demand for transparency and accountability in governance, the promotion of an open and plural participation of citizens in the exercise of power. These critical elements have shaped the discourse and the political organization of Podemos. They account for the form and the language of its politics and they explain part of its resonance with the population.[25] In a nutshell, the 2011 *Indignados* and their epigones in social protests were the historical precondition for the rise of Podemos, whose discourse taps a reservoir of social indignation articulated and popularized by radical movements.

Second, Podemos does not only give pride of place to the values of transparency and accountability, people's sovereignty and the fight against corrupt elites in its political message. In a bid to 'de-professionalize' the business of politics, Podemos has also partly imitated the direct democratic practice of the 15 M movement fostering an open and plural

engagement of 'lay people' in its grassroots. The new party set up local and sectorial 'circles' of members and sympathizers, who debate politics and formulate policy proposals, it made these 'circles' a key node in the organization of the party, it facilitated 'online' forms of involvement accessible to all, it pursued a collective construction of its programme and its electoral lists (for the European Elections in May 2014) and it committed itself programmatically to promote civic participation and control over the institutions of the state.[26]

The 'technopolitical' dimension is a unique innovation of Podemos' participatory democracy and its construction as an instrument of open collective intelligence. Social media and new digital technologies are highly popular in contemporary Spain and they were massively deployed by 15 M activists. Digital networks thus catalysed the expansion of mobilizations by facilitating the sharing of information and the coordination of action. Podemos' organizers did not simply endorse this technopolitics of ordinary citizens, but they made a qualitative leap. They amplified digital participation with new tools and they placed it at the heart of Podemos' development as a network-movement to an extent that remains without precedent in any traditional or new party in Spain.[27]

Podemos immersed itself in popular social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, but it has also built its own platforms and technologies. Most notably, *Plaza Podemos* has made an innovative use of the software *Reddit*. Through it, thousands of members can 'do politics' in their everyday life, from home or at work, by posting notices, texts and videos, by putting forward public proposals, by debating and by voting on party policies.[28] This has set up a permanent online 'agora', in which all party members can think and collaborate in the making of common policies and ideas. The various digital technologies, which include *Loomio* for the organization of the 'circles' and *Appgree* and *Agora Voting* for online votes, contribute to an extensive political participation, self-organization and collective production of party policies and campaigns. They expand already existing procedures, such as elections, to reach thousands of citizens who do not participate physically in the life of the party, but they also enable previously impossible levels of debate and interaction.[29]

This technological breakthrough allowed thousands of people to take part in Podemos' primaries for the May 2014 European elections and in the citizens' Assembly in November 2014 which decided the party's structure, exceeding by far the limits of 'presentist' militancy.[30] Podemos' technopolitics weaves fluid networks of interaction not only between ordinary citizens and a core of party organizers but also among the grassroots themselves, as the political life of the party 'circles' is highly digitized. An open multitude of citizens can thus get involved in political action on different scales and in various ways which do not require their constant physical presence and dedication.

Online political agency reshapes the culture of political participation and belonging. The lines between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the party get blurred. Party politics is reconfigured as an 'open source program', which is made and remade by a community of volunteers with variable degrees of commitment.[31] Hence, Podemos opens up the form of the party, transfiguring it into a network: a hybrid, polycephalous circuit of communication and interaction among digital processes, 'traditional' media and territorial bases. Podemos has consequently manufactured a 'machine of political communication' which 'hacks' public opinion and reconstructs it, multiplying its social impact through diffuse networks and thousands of connections. Via its technopolitical instruments, the organization of Podemos 'expresses a new political subjectivity which calls for the construction of the people as radical politics,'[32] giving rise to a new brand of 'technopopulism' whereby the

people constructs itself in and through new social media and more conventional modes of participatory party politics.[33]

By contrast, the Greek SYRIZA connected with social movements, particularly from 2008 onwards, but has not promoted an analogous participation of citizens in the organization of the party and the formulation of its policies. Moreover, SYRIZA was founded as a coalition of diverse leftist groups but has never questioned the traditional form of the party.[34] Chávez, on the other hand, was based for many years on an ample front of social and political forces. PSUV, the party of Chavismo, was first created in 2006, eight years after Chávez's first election to the presidency. However, direct popular participation in his regime was confined initially to citizens' co-management of social projects for the poor (the 'misiones'). It was only again in 2006 when a process of direct civic engagement in governance was initiated through the 'Communes' and the 'Communal Councils'.[35]

On the other hand, there are limits to Podemos' identification with social movements and horizontal grassroots activity. Podemos does not pretend to be an heir of the 15 M movement and does not fully embrace 15 Mayista horizontalism.[36] While 15 M has been a historical condition for the rise of the party and has exerted a formative impact on its politics, substantial differences keep the two apart. First, Podemos was launched from the top, at the initiative of a 'leading figure' – Pablo Iglesias – and an affiliated nucleus of intellectuals and activists, who have always maintained their hold over the politics of the new organization and its public representation. Second, against the anti-electoral and anti-representative soul of 15 M, the leadership of Podemos has highlighted the importance of the electoral route, it has connected with an older and broader audience of disaffected social majorities beyond the ranks of activists, and it has set out to 'conquer the state' in order to achieve democratic transformations.[37] The Indignados movement was understood by Podemos' frontmen as the expression of a regime crisis and an airing of popular discontent which opens a 'widow of opportunity'. But it had failed until 2014 to gain an effective political translation which would change the balance of power.[38]

The persistence of hierarchy, hegemonic representation, state politics and 'traditional' mediatic communication attests to the survival of 'old-style' representative politics and a strong 'vertical' dimension in the midst of Podemos. This seems at odds with the 'horizontal' layer of egalitarian participation and the 15 M spirit, leading social activists to denounce Podemos as old politics in a new garb which seeks to co-opt movement energies.[39] Accordingly, at the heart of Podemos one can trace a 'disjunctive conjunction' which amalgamates antagonistic modes of political thought and action: the 'hegemonic politics' of the people, who are institutionally represented and guided by leaders, with the 'horizontal politics' of a biopolitical multitude who self-organize in the streets and in assemblies.[40]

The constitutive dualism of Podemos' populism reflects, in effect, the complexity, ambiguity and heterogeneity of the socio-political context in contemporary Spain. On the one hand, recurrent democratic insurgencies since 2011 have fashioned a new 'common sense' which challenges conventional representative politics, holds elites responsible for the crisis, seeks transparency and social control over institutions and enacts plural forms of direct democracy based on open, non-hierarchical assemblies. On the other hand, state institutions remain in place, relatively unaffected by social protest, resisting popular pressures and repressing political contestation. Moreover, the broad diffusion of a radical democratic common sense has failed to occasion a massive growth of active involvement in participatory democracy. Social diversity and fragmentation, the lack of effective coordination

among local mobilizations and political organizations, along with minoritarian participation in popular assemblies have prevented the development of an alternative democratic constituent process that would displace the existing institutionality in the management of collective affairs.[41]

Such weaknesses and failures fuelled the search for new, hybrid forms of civic activism and self-organization after the 15 M movement left the squares and gradually dispersed in 2011. However, the imprint of its political culture is still evident in various post-2011 mobilizations: the 'Mareas' ('tides'), massive labour and civic protests to protect the welfare state; the anti-eviction organization PAH, whose leader Ada Colau won the 2015 municipal elections in Barcelona; the citizens' political front 'Ahora Madrid', which managed to elect its candidate Manuela Carmena as the new mayor of Madrid in 2015. The *Marea Blanca*, for instance, brought together health workers and citizens who fought a wave of privatization in health services. Workers organized outside the traditional trade unions, involving thousands of ordinary citizens and occupying hospitals, in which they set up workers' assemblies.[42] PAH has united anti-eviction activists, lawyers, unemployed citizens, immigrants and others, combining direct action against evictions with more traditional, institutional routes and means of pressure.[43] In PAH, a more coherent organizing core ties up with a loose group of diverse agents who participate in different degrees, making up a plural and open 'network system' which resists strong centralization and fixed hierarchies.[44]

Podemos' dualism, then, is far from an idiosyncratic phenomenon in contemporary Spanish politics. In effect, Podemos must be situated in a broader current of hybrid political constellations after 2011. Apart from PAH, this wider tendency encompasses also the Catalan party CUP, the *Partido X* and the citizens' platforms *Ganemos* which are active in local municipal politics. All these blend horizontal civic participation with 'verticalist' logics of centralization, bureaucracy, hierarchy and engagement with institutions.[45]

The need to accede to institutional levers of power in order to meet popular demands, the search for a coherent alternative discourse that will win over electoral majorities, and the endurance of a social habitus of political delegation and minimal participation explain why 'vertical' organization can be still pertinent today in order to attain the wished-for political results. If effectively sustained, the conjunction of vertical coordination and representation with open, egalitarian participation may help to advance the project of a horizontal democracy of plural 'multitudes' under transitional conditions of impurity and variety, where the 'old' has not passed away and the new is struggling to find its way. Podemos and cognate formations might work thus as 'instruments' of massive political co-ordination and institutional intervention that would not only exact pressure on the state in favour of popular demands but would also 'open up' institutions from within in order to enable their reconstruction and to vest the people with political power on a new, institutionalized basis.

Podemos' dualist strategy might seem to revive or to continue the 'Eurocommunist' politics of the 1970s and the early 1980s in Southern Europe. Eurocommunism in Italy, Spain, France and Greece sought to foster a new European internationalism which would not be aligned with either of the dominant world forces and would explore a 'democratic road to socialism', avoiding both authoritarian communism and complacent reformism. The combination of representative and direct democracy in the party and the state was championed as the linchpin of democratic socialism, particularly among the more leftist tendencies of this movement.[46]

No doubt, the Eurocommunist legacy weighs on the Greek SYRIZA, which originated in the party of *Synaspismos* (1989–2004). The so-called Greek Communist Party 'of the interior' (*KKE Esoterikou*) was the co-founder of Synaspismos together with *KKE* (Communist Party of Greece), and used to be the main proponent of Eurocommunism in Greece. Nikos Poulantzas, an eminent theorist of Eurocommunism,[47] was a member and leading intellectual of *KKE Esoterikou*. The Eurocommunist tradition was eclipsed, however, in Spain and its Italian heartland in the 1980s.[48] Crucially, no direct influence of this legacy can be fathomed in the politics of Podemos.

The contemporary neoliberal hegemony and the collapse of the Soviet Union have produced, of course, a substantially different context compared to the 1970s and the 1980s. As this section has argued, moreover, Podemos has drawn its participatory practices from contemporary social movements and has set out to develop new technologies of grassroots engagement in the party. In this way, Podemos may seem to address a fundamental lack at the core of Eurocommunist parties, in which the interest in participatory democracy was rather abstract and subordinated to bureaucratic statist politics, while actual connections between party structures and social movements were few and far between.[49]

b. 'Common' politics

The discourse and the practice of Podemos gesture towards a 'commoning' of representative politics, a process whereby representative government becomes an affair of lay people, in two related ways. First, the absence of professional politicians from the ranks of Podemos, the formation of 'circles' in which any citizen can formulate policies and engage themselves directly in a common political project, the organic links with social movements and the open primary elections for the selection of party candidates transform political representation. This becomes a business of any interested citizen rather than of professional politicians.[50] This innovation can clear the way for a democracy of the many in which the exercise of political power is a common resource actually available to any citizen, and there are no entrenched divisions between rulers and ruled in democratic governance.

Second, the discourse of Podemos as elaborated by its leadership draws on the 'common sense' of Spanish political culture, both older and new. Echoing the 15 M movement and its distinctive discursivity, Podemos has articulated a diagnosis for the present crisis and has put forward policy alternatives uttering a plain language to which people can easily relate, in terms which are not those of conventional leftist terminology but are shared across large social strata and resonate with electoral majorities hit by austerity policies. In line with contemporary social movements, Podemos refuses to define itself on the basis of a particular ideology, and its activists cast themselves as 'ordinary people like you', 'who understand the needs of ordinary citizens and are open to taking their lead from them through the participatory process.'[51] Moreover, in order to break into a wider audience and to communicate broadly a critical 'common' mindset which is usually excluded from mainstream media, the spokespersons of Podemos appear daily in popular media outlets, including traditional TV channels. As noted above, the party is also deeply steeped in new digital networks through which it echoes and reconfigures public opinion. Accordingly, this is an attempt to achieve hegemony in society not by championing dogmatic truths in an authoritative fashion, but in a deliberative and collaborative manner, by working in and through the actually existing community of feelings and ideas held by ordinary people who are disenchanted with the establishment and cherish democratic values.[52]

The organic connection with popular sentiments and common notions, the use of 'ordinary' language and the self-representation of party activists as 'ordinary people' account for the appeal that Podemos gained in few months since its inception, and they are arguably 'populist in the purest sense of the term.'[53] This populist strategy broke new ground in contemporary Spanish politics by breaking away from traditional ideological discourses while foregrounding popular subjectivities and key social concerns. It turned out to be very successful for at least one year since the May 2014 European elections, resonating powerfully with the youngest voters – where Podemos ranks first in the polls – the students, the unemployed, and urban and educated citizens who see themselves as middle class but are impoverished or frustrated by the crisis. Podemos' voters are left-leaning and disaffected with the status quo. But they bear loose party and ideological identifications, they are immersed in digital social media and they are concerned with specific issues.[54] It looks as if the 'non-ideological', 'common sense' and 'anti-establishment' discourse of Podemos, which diffused itself through new social media in tandem with more traditional channels, is the near-perfect mix for these sectors of the electorate.

Populist discourse can, of course, be just as reactionary and exclusionary as 'common sense' in various social contexts. In the Spanish case, however, 'common sense' contains also the new understandings produced by the 15 M movements. In pitting 'la gente' against the 'casta', in defending public goods, in arguing for accountability and people's power in democratic governance, in blaming political and financial elites for the crisis, austerity and corruption, the endeavour of Podemos' discourse has been to tap the recent shifts in political culture and to re-articulate common conscience in ways that both engage majorities and advance democratic change, navigating a course beyond reactionary conservatism and unattractive, extreme radicalism.[55] As Pablo Iglesias has put it, 'The key is to succeed in making "common sense" go in a direction of change.'[56]

In this regard, the 'populist' lexicon of Podemos, which features 'plain terms' beyond the divisions between left and right, does not only communicate with an existing political community, speaking its language and voicing its demands and its outrage. Podemos seeks also to bring into being a new majoritarian community, a new political front under its hegemony, and it could work to build bridges between the former two communities and another democracy to come.

Needless to say, the adoption and intensive deployment of this populist vocabulary, which is configured around central concepts such as 'la gente' and 'democracia', belies the claim to 'non-ideology'. As indicated above, Podemos articulates a distinctly structured, populist discourse, which is as ideological as any other if by 'ideology' we mean a specific morphology of political discourse that is constructed around core concepts and evinces a relative stability and regularity. The qualification 'non-ideological' should be understood only in the narrow sense of historically known and worn out political ideologies, mainly leftist ideologies speaking a *langue du bois*.

The displacement of the left/right cleavage in favour of the antagonism between 'common people' and the elites is a hallmark of Podemos' populism which sets it apart from SYRIZA. The latter has never renounced its leftist identity,[57] until at least the September 2015 general elections, in which the opposition old/new was privileged over the antagonism left/right in the party's electoral campaign. Podemos' lexicon is thus closer to Chavismo in its first years (1998–2005) when Chávez pitted the people against the corrupt *Punto Fijo* regime, before finally proclaiming the '21st century socialism' in 2006.[58]

c. Reflexivity

Ernesto Laclau's hegemonic theory of populism is not merely an apt analytic tool for giving an account of Podemos' politics. Along with the 15 M political culture and the Latin American experiences of left-wing populism in the last fifteen years, it is one of the key intellectual influences on the political project of Podemos.[59] In effect, one could argue that Laclau's thought informs the political strategy of the intellectual leadership of the new party, the academics based in the Department of Politics at the Complutense University of Madrid, who study and cite his work. Podemos can be seen to this extent as an implementation of Laclau's theory of populism.[60]

Since prominent Podemos' directors, such as Iñigo Errejón and Juan C. Monedero, have had a strong personal involvement with left-leaning populist governments in Latin America, mainly in Bolivia and Venezuela, it can be reasonably assumed that their take on populist politics and their reading of Laclau has been heavily inflected by their experiences from this region.[61]

Leftist populism in Latin America today has also found a theoretical expression in the work of Alvaro Garcia Linera, the vice-president of Evo Morales' government in Bolivia. Linera has put forward a complex understanding of state politics and hegemony, reaffirming the centrality of the state as a site of struggle and an instrument of progressive politics.[62] Moreover, in his doctoral thesis on Evo Morales and the *Movement towards Socialism* (MAS), Errejón grasps how Morales managed to build a counter-hegemonic front by integrating a diversity of indigenous, cocaleros' and anti-neoliberal struggles. He equally underscores the need to engage with the state in order to reconstruct state institutions.[63] In Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador, furthermore, the populist rupture initiated a new constituent process which set out to reform the state and society through the making of new constitutions.[64] This tight intertwinement with constituent power is absent in Laclau's approach, but it singles out contemporary leftist populism in Latin America and it is strongly echoed in Podemos' critique of the 1978 Spanish Constitution and its call to amend the constitution.

An in-depth study of the comparative weight that Latin American experiences and Laclau's thought have exerted on Podemos' populism cannot be undertaken here. It suffices to show, however, that Laclau's discourse theory constitutes a distinct source in the elaboration of Podemos' politics by its leaders.[65] It is worth noting that Laclau's frame of thought guides Errejón's analysis of the hegemony of MAS in Bolivia.[66] More crucially, perhaps, Laclau's impact speaks for itself in Errejón's own account of the party's strategy in the 2014 European elections. Errejón directed Podemos' electoral campaign, which was driven, as he states, by a 'constructivist vision of political discourse.'[67] Key Laclauian terms, such as 'articulation' (of popular discontent), 'construction of political identities', 'populist discourse of the left', 'resignification of floating signifiers', the articulation of discourse around 'dichotomies' which pit the 'people' against the 'elites', mark and organize Errejón's exegesis of the conceptual grid that informed Podemos' electoral strategy.[68]

Such a reflexive application of populism is apparently without known precedent in the history of populist politics, including the more recent cases of SYRIZA and Chavismo. Podemos' theoretically informed populism thus illustrates the kind of social reflexivity that Giddens, among others, has attributed to modernity. Scientific knowledge of social practices is inserted into the practices themselves, as it is used to reflect upon and to transform them. This feedback loop between scientific discourse and social activities contributes to the inherent instability and mutability of the modern world. Social theories become in turn

subject to contestation and revision insofar as their own intervention in social realities alters unpredictably the very object of their study.[69]

The short life of Podemos and its reflexive populism does not allow any secure appreciation of the effects of such reflexivity on both the theory and the practice of populism at this early stage. It is possible, however, to advance a set of conjectural claims, responding partly to critical remarks about the impact of Laclau's theory on Podemos' politics.[70] The first claim is that Laclau's influence is bound indeed to assign a primary place to the 'people' over class or other collective subjects in a political strategy that is oriented by his thought.[71] In this regard, the success of Podemos' populism seemed to confirm initially the pertinence of such a strategic choice under the late modern conditions of widespread social heterogeneity and fragmentation in which there are no other broadly shared and stable social identities beyond the 'people' or the 'nation.' On the other hand, the contention that Laclau's populist hegemony 'moderates' political radicalism, keeping it within the confines of existing liberal democracies, is rather ill-founded. The politics of 'hegemony' is all about the constitution of social orders themselves, installing new orders or defending established regimes.[72] Laclau, moreover, does not dismiss 'revolution' in the sense of the institution of new social orders around new principles. What he rejects is the idea of a definitely emancipated society which is fully reconciled with itself.[73]

The most interesting implication seems to be, rather, that a certain take on Laclau's thought, which elevates charismatic leaders to a pillar of effective populism, is likely to have reinforced vertical tendencies in Podemos, moving from prominent figures who function as a nodal point of popular unity to leaders who direct their parties in an authoritative style.[74] A reception of Laclau's hegemony that emphasizes the catalytic role of individual leadership is likely to have been affirmed by the experience of Latin American left-wing populism, which also weighs heavily on the political directors of Podemos.[75] One could argue, furthermore, that if there is any truth to various criticisms that have been levelled against Pablo Iglesias and his nucleus, accusing them of seeking to monopolize Podemos by imposing their agenda and by strengthening their grip on the party to the detriment of plurality and openness,[76] we have witnessed another reflexive application of the theory of hegemony, this time inwards, within the organization of Podemos, rather than outwards, in Spanish society and the electorate.

After the launch of Podemos by Pablo Iglesias and an affiliated group in early 2014, followed by the growth of horizontal grassroots involvement, the citizens' Assembly in November 2014 marked, according to critics, a vertical turn in the actual workings and the formal constitution of Podemos which was laid down in this convention. The leadership of Pablo Iglesias and his allies sought to consolidate its command over the party, putting to vote complete lists of candidates for the executive and the supervising committees of the party, as well as final documents on the organizational structure, the political principles and the ethics of Podemos, which were all ratified en bloc by eligible members. In contrast with the open primaries and the participatory framing of the programme for the European elections in May 2014, the tactic of voting for pre-drafted lists and programmes in the constituent assembly of Podemos seemed to enact a plebiscitary relationship between the leader and his followers, the broader membership of the party beyond the circles, who were invited to simply sanction his decisions. Accordingly, the notion of the 'people' at play within Podemos' politics shifted from an open and participative multitude of active citizenry to a passive and homogeneous mass led by an elite.[77]

The trend towards hierarchy and centralization is brought into relief also if one compares the organizational scheme put forward by Iglesias and four other prominent members of his 'Claro que Podemos' faction with the alternative draft submitted by the 'Sumando Podemos' faction of Pablo Echenique and Teresa Rodriguez. The first document, which was endorsed due to a system of online slate voting, re-established the all-too-traditional position of the 'general secretary', vesting him with decisive capacities: to act as the institutional representative of the party, to secure the cohesion of the party's strategy and internal organization etc.[78] By contrast, the alternative scheme allowed for three 'national spokespersons' of Podemos and strictly circumscribed the authority of all party officers, subordinating them to the 'will of the people,' forbidding them to take any major political decision, legislating limited terms in office, rotation and recall. Moreover, the competing proposal foregrounded the Circles as the fundamental organs of the party, it introduced grassroots initiatives with increased powers to make policy, to recall officers and to convoke assemblies, and it elaborated on ways to forge close ties with social movements, viewing them as protagonists in the process of democratic transformation.[79]

This turning point signalled the crystallization of two contending tendencies that vie for hegemony over the party. The one seeks to increase cohesion, efficiency and majoritarian appeal through centralized coordination in order to win office and kick-start the reconstruction of institutions from above, while the other prioritizes direct grassroots self-organization, the expansion of social mobilization, plurality and openness.[80] While the first faction around Pablo Iglesias prevailed in the constituent assembly in November 2014, its dominance was partly challenged in the primary elections for the regional structures of Podemos and the lists of candidates for the regional and municipal elections in early 2015. Regardless of the final outcome of this ongoing conflict, it is arguable at this stage that a drift towards top-down rule and cohesion in the style of old party-politics has been growing in the midst of Podemos. A plebiscitary relation between the leader and his mass constituency, reviving a signal form of populist politics,[81] has been facilitated in effect by the looseness and the immaturity of a nascent political organization that lacks party cadres and any other solid political structures between the leaders, the rank and file and the broader electorate, which could mediate these relationships and hold the leaders in check.

'Technopopulism' lies at the core of these developments in Podemos. Party membership though digital networks can attract a mass of 'virtual' members and 'clickactivists' who are distinguished from party militants and organized grassroots. Such 'followers' tend to be minimally involved in party politics and debates, but they still participate through online voting, ratifying thus the choices of the leaders and conferring on them a semblance of plebiscitary democratic legitimacy. Moreover, reliance on digital technologies for decision-making increases the risks of manipulation from the top, especially when the software is run by a 'technical' group attached to the political directors. Critics of Podemos' leadership have claimed, in effect, that it indirectly manipulated the voting procedures in the party's constituent assembly by resorting to devices such as 'slate voting' by clicking on complete lists of candidates.[82]

In this respect, Podemos' political direction is reminiscent of Chávez who exercised a strong personalist leadership and communicated directly with the 'masses' of the urban poor, without the mediations of an organized party.[83] No doubt, the degree of personal cult and massive followership has been much higher in the case of Venezuela. But Podemos contrasted with the leftist populism of SYRIZA until the beginning of 2015. The longer

history of SYRIZA (founded in 2004), its consolidated organization and the vivid political debate and dissent in its ranks held in check the power of the leader, Alexis Tsipras.[84] This state of affairs has changed, however, after Tsipras' coming to power in 2015. He now seems to have tightened his grip over the party and the government, bearing witness again to the vertical, centralizing trends of populist politics.[85]

Even after the 'verticalist turn' of Podemos in November 2014, the picture remains, however, more complicated than it would seem at first sight. Crucially, Pablo Iglesias has never been a 'lonely leader' like Hugo Chávez and his strong *personalismo*. Podemos' direction tended to be collective from the outset, as publicly visible and active political scientists, Juan Carlos Monedero and Iñigo Errejón, made up a 'triumvirate' with Pablo Iglesias and were surrounded by Carolina Bescansa and Luis Alegre, among others.[86] To further complicate things, Juan Carlos Monedero stepped down from the official leadership after the May 2015 regional elections, without forswearing Podemos. He continued, instead, his public interventions in Podemos' politics, calling for a return to genuine grassroots participation.[87] Finally, Podemos' technopolitics is double-edged, contributing to the inherent ambiguity of its populism. Its digital network structure still allows for massive collective participation in the party and the making of party policies in ways which can thwart attempts at manipulation and elite rule.[88] Blurring the lines between inside/outside, online involvement of a multitude of individuals and groups can also work to mitigate the conflicts between verticality and horizontality, hegemony and autonomy.

In any case, a final prevalence of vertical hegemony over horizontal plurality and autonomy will fully dissolve the constructive dualism of Podemos and will resolve the constitutive ambiguity which defines populist politics more generally, i.e. the conflict between authoritarian and egalitarian, democratizing tendencies,[89] in favour of the former. Such an outcome would spell the end of Podemos as an original experiment in populist politics, reasserting a traditional populist authoritarianism, and it will ruin the prospects of Podemos as an instrument of democratization, even if it secured some electoral success in the short term. A predominance of vertical power seems bound to alienate grassroots activists and to deactivate the democratic basis of the party, which had been a source of vital dynamism and had nurtured productive ties with social movements and localities. The eclipse of people's direct mobilization dismantles also a powerful motor of democratic change from below.[90]

The sinister effects of verticalism and bureaucratization became evident in early 2015, and may have taken their toll on Podemos' popularity, which has stagnated and fallen since then. Horizontalism, pluralism, civic participation and close interaction with social mobilization had adorned Podemos with an aura of novelty, which set this organization apart from the 'old' political system, its corruption and its decay, vesting Podemos with the profile of the 'outsider' and contributing thereby to its success.[91] Hence, when the novelty and the attendant distinctiveness wore off, Podemos came to be identified with a system from which citizens are alienated, and the party lost its competitive edge.[92] This is an intuition shared by Podemos' members,[93] although it is still in need of empirical corroboration through studies of voting behaviour. Available opinion polls indicate, however, that the highest fall of Podemos' appeal – by 40% – has taken place among the youngest voters (18–24 years old), lending some plausibility to this hypothesis.[94]

Despite appearances to the contrary, however, personalism and elitism are not an obvious implication of Laclau's theory. Laclau argued, indeed, that 'the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality … is inherent to the formation of a "people".'[95] But he clarified

that 'symbolic unification' does not amount necessarily to sovereign rule by an individual as in the thought of Thomas Hobbes.

> The difference between that situation and the one we are discussing is that Hobbes is talking about actual ruling, while we are talking about constituting a signifying totality, and the latter does not lead automatically to the former. Nelson Mandela's role as the symbol of the nation was compatible with a great deal of pluralism within his movement.[96]

In effect, the conception of hegemony in the radical democratic project which Laclau and Mouffe fleshed out in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* champions a conflictual pluralism that contests the prevalence of any single political logic, including that of hegemony and unification, and pleads for a constructive synthesis among multiple, conflicting logics, especially between autonomy and hegemony, or horizontalism and verticalism. Addressing the 'apparent dichotomy autonomy/hegemony',[97] Laclau and Mouffe pose the question 'is there not an incompatibility between the proliferation of political spaces proper to a radical democracy and the construction of collective identities on the basis of the logic of equivalence?' Their answer is that the 'forms of democracy should … be plural … The conception of a plurality of political spaces is incompatible with the logic of equivalence only on the assumption of a closed system.'[98] On their view, a radical democracy accepts that 'the coexistence of two different and contradictory social logics, existing in the form of a mutual limitation of their effects, is perfectly possible.'[99] But, much more than a mere concession, 'This moment of tension, of openness, which gives the social its essentially incomplete and precarious character, is what every project of radical democracy should set out to institutionalize.'[100]

Conclusion

The party formation of Podemos, launched in 2014, is situated in a broader current of 'inclusionary', left-leaning populisms which has surged forth in the last 15 years in Europe and Latin America. This form of populism deviates from the stereotypes of nationalist extremism and xenophobia which beset much populist politics in contemporary Europe. Podemos shares the anti-elitist discourse of other leftist populists, it is likewise a political response to the 'post-democratic' closure of liberal democracies and it promises to reclaim popular sovereignty and to foster social justice. However, Podemos is also marked off by a set of singular features: its more intimate ties with 'horizontalist' social movements and participatory democracy, its 'technopolitics', a process of 'commoning' political discourse and representation beyond the left/right cleavage, and a reflexive application of populist theory which is unique in the history of modern populism. Podemos, however, converges again with many other instances of left- and right-wing populism insofar as it manifests potent tendencies towards centralization, personalist leadership and top-down direction, which clash with the culture of non-hierarchical, direct and multitudinous participation.

Under the present, critical state of democracy, it is arguable that the ambiguous, conflictual mix of verticalism and horizontalism enacted by Podemos in its beginnings is able to open ways forward. An uneasy blend between cohesion, representation, institutional and majoritarian politics, on the one hand, and direct collective participation, grassroots initiatives, plurality, contestation of hierarchies, on the other, has the potential successfully to negotiate ambivalent conditions in which the old – the delegation of responsibility, hierarchies and state institutions closed to collective participation – has not died yet, while the new struggles to assert and to constitute itself.

Yet, as the contemporary thinker of populism, Ernesto Laclau, argued in his last work, when he addressed the latest democratic mobilizations in Northern Africa, Europe and the US in 2011,

> the horizontal dimension of autonomy will be incapable, left to itself, of bringing about long-term historical change if it is not complemented by the vertical dimension of 'hegemony' – that is, a radical transformation of the state. Autonomy left to itself leads, sooner or later, to the exhaustion and the dispersion of the movements of protest. But hegemony not accompanied by mass action at the level of civil society leads to a bureaucratism that will be easily colonized by the corporative power of the forces of the status quo. To advance both in the directions of autonomy and hegemony is the real challenge to those who aim for a democratic future …. [101]

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Notes

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