The Future of Podemos

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Podemos can still change Spain for the better. But it won't do so by chasing the political center.

The strategic debate inside Podemos has become a public issue. Pablo Iglesias, the leader of the Spanish party, even recently jumped into the discussionwith an article explicitly inspired by Antonio Gramsci. But beyond the direct leadership of the party, the strategy debate involves something that pertains to everyone — to the scores of people and social sectors who desire a profound transformation of the Spanish political reality.

What started as background noise after the steamrolling of Vista Alegre has become an uproar. The populist strategy of the blitzkrieg-style "electoral war machine," determined as it was to affect a quick and devastating victory, has turned out to be mistaken on its own terms. The very battlefield such a strategy was designed to navigate — that of electoral polls and political marketing — has turned the blitzkrieg against itself.

It would behoove us to remember the high cost of this strategy: surrendering the original form of the party — at its height in the post-15M moment — capable as it was then of providing an organic, geographically coherent, cross-sectoral feeling, that led to circumstances of overflowing voluntary participation. More than a thousand citizens' "circles" appeared far and wide across the country in only a few months and tens of thousands of people were drawn to this new party whose name evoked action.

Despite all this, from the point of view of the strategic blitzkrieg, the circles were flagged as a "militant obstacle." Because they had real weight in the organization — so it was said — they impeded wider communications with the unmobilized majority.

The Podemos strategists gestured toward these social strata, where the political experts have spent years tracking the largest voting reserves. And from this stereotyped dichotomy between "the militants" and "the citizenry" (or in a less caffeinated form, simply, "the people"), the circles were subordinated for the sake of a supposedly unmediated communion with the agitated "normal people." Concurrently, those critical of this model were cast out one after another with the same accusation: the complacent taste of the minoritarian and fear of taking power.

The catch, or one of them, as was well understood by the mass movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is that organizations that flow from the grassroots upward are not only more democratic, but also provide direct sources of information about the political landscape and how to navigate it.

Starting with the work of Karl Marx and ending with the revolutionary syndicalism of the early twentieth century, transformational movements have always understood that direct information about social phenomena and the political situation is required — at least if you want to build and organize emerging political realities, and not simply reproduce the most static ideological elements of the moment.

In other words, an organization that draws its information and decisions from below doesn't only reflect a taste for democracy. It becomes indispensable for a party movement that is the catalyst for transformation rather than its gatekeeper.

Voluntarily sequestered from its organizational base, Podemos has made a succession of decisions based solely on opinion polls, talk shows, and electoral polling. The biggest problem with this strategy is that in complex and fragmented societies, this ideology of direct communication with "the people," which presumably transforms their inherent agitation into electoral hegemony, is little more than an illusion.

One does not have to go far to find examples, different though the contexts may be. In the ascendant phase of the mid-2000s economic bubble, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's government also employed this method to maintain the illusion of cultural progress until the economic crisis, simply put, crushed it.

Ultimately, the Podemos strategy is circling towards a political center that nowadays can only revive the political categories that were decisive before 15M destabilized them. The subjective declaration "I am a moderate" comes to mean the same thing as "I am middle class," and makes little sense in a context in which the material conditions of the middle class are being demolished.

This gesture is even more calamitous in a party whose own principal success, up to today, continues to be the audacity of having broken with the political impasse it met after the 15M. If the movement's founders had had their eyes glued to the polls during that time, Podemos would not exist.

After reaching the peak of their growth around January 2015, Podemos has entered a stage of stagnation followed by another of decline. But what's worse, the movement of discourse towards the center that's accompanied this electoral strategy has created the conditions for the rise of Ciudadanos as the regenerative political force of the old regime. No other formation could have entered without the space Podemos opened.

The paradox is that opening such a gap created the conditions for others to fill it. The insistence on not defining itself in programmatic terms, on using corruption as a central term of battle — with its marked tendency to fixate on individuals, opening the door to the interchangeability of elites and reformism — and on avoiding the fractures that exist between myriad sectors and social fragments that compose "the people," have all helped spur the rise of a party/huckster like Ciudananos who, with its greater agility in this terrain, has managed to accomplish the difficult task of getting people to the polls to vote for it. Simply put, "the people" prefer the original to the copy.

In light of these results, nothing said so far can pass for an underground critique of the Podemos mainstream. Like it or not we are facing a strategic debate. The stunning resignation of Podemos cofounder Juan Carlos Monedero last month, after a few declarations distilling the mood of criticisms of the populist/centrist strategy, has forcibly, and irreversibly, broken down the debate.

Following this, we might doubt the authenticity of Monedero's declarations, keeping in mind that he himself was one of the most enthusiastic proponents of the Vista Alegre model. But it would be a

mistake to center him in the discussion.

In fact, the worst that could happen to Podemos in this moment would be for this singular political opportunity to be misunderstood as a squabble among notables. Of course there are big names in the mix, but unlike the battles between Susana Díaz and Pedro Sánchez in the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, in Podemos two strategic options lie in the sand. It's not simply a power play for control of the party.

Seizing this moment to launch an organized and pluralistic debate out of which a new Podemos can be salvaged — that strategically and organizationally develops the force of confrontation and rupture held within the original Podemos — seems like the real option. At least if we don't want cry over spilt milk and spoil this historic opportunity for change.

Given this, one might wonder, in line with the same logic that has brought Podemos to this point, whether betting on a process of reorientation during election season is an adventure that will cost too many votes.

"Nothing turns the voter off more than an internal division" is one of those commonsense statements (similar to "the political center must be won over") with which conventional political science and electoral sociology have been hammering us for years. But these statements gesture, once again, toward stable political, economic, and political times, times past, which are very different from the ones in which we now live.

The speed of change that has allowed snake-oil salesmen like Ciudananos, dressed up by recycled right-wingers and political climbers of every stripe, to burst through in barely four months, also make it possible for a new Podemos to reclaim their ability to confront the oligarchic government.

Only then, after the May elections, is it correct to gamble on another constituency for the party. In the framework of this new civil assembly, revising and democratizing the organizational model is needed, as is defining the strategic discussion in new terms. Only in this way can we reclaim the vision of change which attracted so many social classes, and reclaim Podemos as the tool of transformation and popular empowerment that is needed to win elections — and going forward, to force a rupture with the post-Franco Regime of '78.

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