

Podemos, the 15M Indignados Movement and the Radical Left in Spain

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In this article I will analyze the current situation of the Left in Spain, ahead of the forthcoming December 20, 2015 General Elections, by considering how four of its political actors (United Left, Podemos, The Municipalist Platforms and Anti-capitalist Left) have shaped their strategies and agendas in response to the political changes that the 15M Indignados movement brought about. Indeed, at a time when Podemos, the newest party of the Radical Left, has distanced itself from the spirit of the 15M Revolution, the changes that the Indignados brought about into mainstream politics have achieved an almost mythical status in the imaginary of the Left.

“Izquierda Unida” (United Left) was until recently the largest, state-wide electoral force of the Radical Left in Spain. Although it is commonly considered a party, United Left is actually a permanent coalition of parties. Founded in 1986, it has a federal structure and its main partner is the PCE, the Communist Party of Spain. Its agenda straddles between revolutionary socialism and radical social-democracy, with important influences from environmentalism and feminism. Their electoral clout has been substantial over the years — their gains hover around 9% — although never important enough to shape policy at the state level.

Things started to change for United Left on May 15, 2011. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered in different cities throughout Spain in protest against the political and financial elites, whom they blamed for the severe economic crisis in the country. They demanded political democracy and socioeconomic rights. A series of demonstrations, assemblies and occupations of public spaces would take place during the following two and a half years; the 15M Indignados Revolution was born. Despite the similarities between the socioeconomic demands of the Indignados and those of United Left, the results for United Left in the elections held on May 22, 2011 (Regional and local, 7.38%) and November 20, 2011 (Spanish State, 6.92%) were disappointing. This put United Left’s status as the main actor for the Radical Left into question.

The 15M Indignados

At the end of 2010, Fabio Gandara and Pablo Gallego, two young cyber activists concerned about the crisis in Spain, initiated an impromptu platform in Facebook (Platform for the Coordination of Groups for a Civil Mobilisation) that soon attracted other individuals along with a wide range of new and more established socio-economic protest groups. This platform, who made the first call for a demonstration on the 15 May 2011 (a date chosen for its proximity to the 22 of May Regional and Local Elections), was given the name of “Democracia Real Ya” (“Real Democracy Now”) in March 2011. Fabio and Pablo had no allegiance to any protest group, and explicitly rejected any connection with ideological or political party labels.

The agenda of the Indignados started to build up from the foundation of a number of lists of grievances connected to economic and political dispossession. But this autonomous and multi-organisation horizontal movement never managed to develop and agree on a detailed set of socio-economic and/or constitutional proposals. The demands for social justice and political change, put forward by the organisers of the demonstrations of the 15M, lived alongside more group-specific issues being raised by many pre-existing organisations such as the PAH (Platform against home evictions) or JSF (Youth Without a Future), as they joined their efforts in the promotion and organisation of the mobilisation.

The indispensable role played by social media in the organisation and promotion of the demonstrations and the collaborative nature of online activism made the 15M an unprecedentedly decentralised movement. However, social movement sociologist Flesher Fominaya emphasizes the connections of the 15M with other political movements who throughout the previous decades had developed the participatory and deliberative culture that seemed so natural to the Indignados when they emerged. She disputes the constitutive role played by social media for this new movement, claiming this should be regarded as the latest episode of a long-standing political struggle.

In many respects Flesher Fominaya is right. The indignados embraced well-trodden methods of participatory democracy. Capitalism was criticised comprehensively in line with previous protest groups' demands. The political system as a whole, including all parties with political representation, was openly questioned. The content of the demands of Democracia Real Ya can be clearly read as a reproach of the power of the economic and political elites of Spain. However, in their Manifesto they make no mention of the words "capitalism" or "class".

At this point it is worth reflecting upon the role that language played in the building of the 15M Indignados as a self-created movement. Given that the most immediate objective of Democracia Real Ya was to hold a number of demonstrations on May 11, the first Indignados created digital spaces of communication for the purpose of promoting and coordinating those demonstrations. In this context, the production of appealing slogans and short pieces of counter-hegemonic discourse became a priority. The digital environment multiplied the messages and accelerated their distribution. Those spaces of communication were hugely autonomous, allowing language production to depart from existing linguistic canons used by traditional revolutionary groups. This type of communicative engagement involved a reframing of political issues. After the first months of their existence, the creation of an autonomous language became such a useful and distinctive practice of the Indignados that it acquired an essential role as a component of the new Radical Left community.

This interpretation resonates with research that looks at the Indignados movement under the frame of the populist theories of Ernesto Laclau, for whom language is a tool to define conflict and build the new identity of the people. However, this theory of populism does not touch upon the effect of online mass communication on the nature of the resulting political movement. I believe that the decentralized and fast processes of production and consumption of language in online environments disrupt all the conventions about authorship of the new linguistic usages and frames, enabling them to be owned collectively. This is why language becomes a key attribute of the identity of the new political community, and not just a tool.

Another defining characteristic of the Indignados movement is its structure. The Indignados used a formula of organic voluntary accumulation of individual citizens, grievances, local assemblies, protest groups, parties with no political representation (eg, Anti-capitalist Left), bloggers, public communicators, academics, (eg, Pablo Iglesias and Manuel Castells) and informal leadership networks.

In order to have a full picture of the Indignados, and understand some of the dilemmas of this new Left, we need to take into account the interplay between the digital and the physical spheres. In the case of the Indignados their first gathering on May 15th acquired an unsuspected emotional dimension: after months of work in the mainly digital back stages, the online community of organisers and supporters witnessed an explosion of street physicality. For most people, the 15M protest was different from previous mobilisations such as the anti-war movement or trade union campaigns due to its origin, composition, appeal, size and potential.

This shock of self-consciousness is particularly poignant given that the Indignados did not feel represented by anyone but themselves. Clearly, it was difficult for any traditional party to

communicate with them without being a part of them. Neither United Left nor the main trade unions could do more than show sympathy for the movement, and echo some of their demands. No existing large party could dare direct the movement, let alone influence it. However, the uniqueness of the Indignados is also the reason for its downfall. By 2013, the pace of activity slowed down considerably and electoral prospects were not promising. With the May 2014 elections to the European Parliament approaching, many activists and leaders felt compelled to make a move to provide an effective electoral vehicle for the Indignados.

Podemos

“Mover Ficha” (“Making a Move”, as in a chess game), the founding manifesto of Podemos that was signed by a number of public figures, academics and activists, was published on January 12, 2014 only a few days after it had been set in motion. By January 14, 2014, Pablo Iglesias, who initially had not signed the manifesto, had confirmed his involvement as the speaker of the movement. The manifesto was conceived within “Izquierda Anti-capitalista” (“Anti-capitalist Left”, a section of the Fourth International). It contemplated the need to create an electoral platform — with open primaries for the selection of candidates — for the European Elections of 2014 and involved well-known public figures with media projection.

Iglesias was the ideal choice for many reasons. He was a university lecturer in politics, a former activist in United Left and had worked for years in alternative local TV projects where he would promote counter-hegemonic approaches and content. Iglesias had also become a well-known advocate of the 15M. In December 2013, the largest online left-wing newspaper Público had agreed to provide a digital platform for Iglesias’ TV programme “La Tuerka”. The founder of Público, Jaime Roures, a former Trotskyist activist who had been imprisoned several times during the Franco dictatorship, had also key business connections with La Sexta TV, one of the big commercial channels. The appeal to the Indignados was guaranteed as Podemos had embedded the linguistic strategies and contents of the Indignados. Podemos was making an intensive and carefully planned use of social media and had promised to honour the key demands of the 15M, including the use of participatory democracy.

The creation of Podemos in January 2014 was not only motivated by the slow pace of the different organisations linked to the Indignados in reaching an agreement on a shared electoral platform for the 15M. The perceived inability of United Left to formulate a convincing strategy to attract a substantial mass of voters and win elections was also an important factor. However, at the time of Podemos’ inception there was not an agreed master plan for it to become a populist force that would compete against United Left. In fact, as early as January 2014, some of the signatories of the “Mover Ficha” manifesto, including Iglesias himself, indicated their willingness to converge with United Left and be part of the same electoral list in the May European Elections.

For United Left this was not an easy option. Anti-capitalist Left had already been trying to get United Left to agree over a shared platform for those very elections. However, “Mover Ficha” contained a belated criticism of United Left and Operation Podemos had not gone down well with the less open sector of the Spanish Communist Party, which managed to prevail over the sector led by Alberto Garzón and Mauricio Valiente, who supported integration with Podemos. By the end of February 2014, United Left had confirmed that they would not include Podemos candidates in their lists to the European Elections. The greatest obstacle, though, was Podemos’ demands to hold open primaries for the selection of candidates.

The evolution of Podemos during its two years of life has been noteworthy: Podemos has moved from grassroots participatory internal democracy, to a de facto centralised committee structure. Although its statutes grant extensive rights of proposal and decision making, including the removal of officers, the shrinking of members’ participation makes it impossible to achieve the minimum number of

members' votes required to activate many processes. Podemos has also opted for a closed number of ready-made online platforms and tools, downgrading the role of the open software grassroots activists who saw Podemos as a techno-anarchist movement in which to develop ambitious alternative spaces of participation.

The transformation of Podemos' policies can be summarised as a shift from revolutionary policies that would disrupt austerity and neoliberalism, to a well contextualised and creative, yet un-revolutionary, neo-Keynesianism that has been garnished with the glamour of specific contributions and endorsements of prestigious international economists. Some key policies such as the auditing of the public debt have been dramatically modified. Podemos are now respectful with an increasingly wider section of the business community and very mindful of the constitutional and factual boundaries of the market economy and capitalism. Pablo Iglesias himself has recently declared that many of their original proposals of May 2014 were not feasible in the short or medium term.

Anti-capitalist Left

The case of Anti-capitalist Left is very interesting because it shows the liquidity of the Radical Left in Spain. This section of the 4th International had been part of United Left until 2007, under the name "Espacio alternativo", and played an important role in the creation of Podemos. The text of the manifesto "Mover ficha" ("Making a move") had been drafted as an internal motion within Anti-capitalist Left. According to the newspaper El Diario, who provided a copy of the original motion, the text had been copied almost literally and then inserted in the founding manifesto of Podemos. The unsuspected kiss of life received by the manifesto was celebrated by the organisation.

However, when Iglesias was asked by signatories of "Mover ficha" to become the figure head who would kick-start Podemos, many Anti-capitalist Left members thought that a more thorough discussion was needed. Nonetheless, key Anti-capitalist Left members and most of its activists became involved in Podemos and managed to gain positions of responsibility within the party. The two most notable cases are the hugely charismatic Teresa Rodríguez, the leader of Podemos in Andalucía, the largest region of Spain, and Miguel Urbán, European Member of Parliament.

The relationship between members of Anti-capitalist Left and the Podemos' apparatus has been tricky, particularly from the summer of 2014, when the constituent process for Podemos to become a fully-fledged party started. In the internal processes and elections, Anti-capitalist Left would typically side against Iglesias' loyal officialist faction called "Claro que Podemos" ("Of Course We can") and join or promote alternative proposals and electoral lists.

Anti-capitalist Left restructured and renamed their organisation as the "Anti-capitalists" movement in January 2015 as they relinquished their status as a political party. This was forced on them by new Podemos Statutes passed in autumn 2014 according to which nobody could have elected positions in Podemos and in another organisation. The tensions became more notorious in the media when Podemos obtained 15 (out of 109) seats in the regional elections of March 2015 in Andalucía. As PSOE had not won an absolute majority in the Parliament, various sorts of agreements to form a government between two of the four main parties, including Podemos, started to be contemplated. A confrontation with the national executive, dominated by Iglesias, arose over 1) the conditions under which Podemos would agree to support Susana Diaz (PSOE), 2) how to deal with the party base and the media about these conditions, and 3) the role of the regional branch of Podemos in any negotiations.

The discrepancies continued when the process for the nomination of candidates for the December 20, 2015 elections were agreed over the summer. The deadlines were so tight that it was hardly possible to put together lists for the internal primaries. Also, the party's executive had the right to reserve a number of centrally designated positions in the lists of each of the 50 electoral

constituencies in Spain. Anti-capitalists rejected this to the extent of not presenting candidates. Even the sector loyal to Iglesias split into two over the designation of candidates. Many top positions in the lists had been given to candidates who are new to Podemos, as they have been headhunted centrally on the basis of their public projection and professional prestige. Often, they are not local to the constituency they have been allocated to.

Nevertheless, for many Anti-capitalists the drift of the political agenda of Podemos toward “the centre of the chessboard” (using Podemos’ terminology) is not a reason to abandon the most powerful Trojan horse they could dream of in neoliberal Europe. Another reason why Anti-capitalists remain loyal is their belief that a bad result for Podemos in the election would generate a defeatist atmosphere across the whole of the Radical Left. For Miguel Urbán, Podemos needs another general assembly after the December 20 elections.

In my view, the faction of Iglesias, who still see Anti-capitalists as a necessary but increasingly uncomfortable contribution to the party, may take the opportunity to push them even further away. Therefore, the key for Anti-capitalists is to connect with other militants of Podemos who do not belong to Anti-capitalists but are unhappy with its centralisation and would prefer to see more radical left wing policies. The Anti-capitalists involvement in the recently reactivated anti-war (Syria) movement, and their enthusiasm about Municipalist platforms, provides them with opportunities to tap into causes that will certainly grow stronger.

The Municipalist Platforms

The Platforms are the other new electoral strand of the 15-M Indignados. The first one of them was created in Barcelona in June 2014. Soon after a handful of them sprung up in other parts of Catalonia and Madrid. Their aim was to create political spaces in which a programme and a list of candidates to the local elections of May 2015 would be agreed to by using the methodology of participatory democracy. In some cases, like Barcelona, the Platform continued after the elections. In some others, like Madrid, the platform disappeared after the election.

Podemos and United Left participated in these platforms, alongside other organisations and individuals, sometimes with great difficulties. Following the great results of the Platforms in Madrid (Ahora Madrid), Barcelona (Barcelona en Comú) and other big cities, leading to their top candidates becoming mayors, the inclusive formula of the platforms, combined with the inclusion of charismatic figures, was hailed as the perfect solution to integrate all the Radical Left parties and activists in an electorally effective way for the General Elections.

United Left

United Left supported this view and suggested converging under a state-wide platform called “Ahora en Común”, but Podemos decided to integrate only into the left-wing multiparty platforms in Catalonia (under the wing of Barcelona’s mayor Ada Colau), Valencia, Galicia and in one of the 3 provinces in Aragón. Podemos’ rationale for this selective policy of alliances is that Podemos alone would not be able to compete in those autonomous communities with a strong local Radical Left. In relation to the rest of the Spanish State, Podemos regards itself as the electoral platform in which United Left members, notably Garzón, would be extremely welcome.

Under these circumstances, United Left had no option but to promote their own platform, Unidad Popular, with a clear reference to the Chilean socialist party of Salvador Allende. Independent activists, members of smaller groups and candidates from Unidad Popular itself are running together. Open primaries were held, delivering the victory to Alberto Garzón as a candidate for the presidency of the Government. Given the proximity of the elections, the composition of the lists was, in many constituencies, quickly negotiated between United Left and different smaller groups. The idea was to reach the primaries with as much consensus as possible for voters then to ratify. Any

citizen with relevant ID was allowed to vote, online or physically. The policies of Unidad Popular, less detailed than Podemos', question the economic system and recover much of the socialist spirit of many proposals of Podemos that were watered down or eliminated in their current programme.

United Left has gone through, and overcome, a deep crisis as a result of Podemos' challenge. United Left has found a second wind precisely when, forced by the new scenario, its internal balance was tilted in favour of those United Left members and leaders, such as Garzón, who supported a more open and flexible approach to political collaboration. This shift has enabled United Left to resort to the very strategy that they rejected in 2014 for the European elections. Since their intention seems to be the consolidation of the platform model and, in the future, to collaborate with Podemos, they must concentrate in sustaining Unidad Popular. Even if their results are well below their expectations, the concentration of activists around this platform may prove key for the survival of United Left in the aftermath of the elections.

Concluding thoughts and a way forward

The evolution of the Spanish Radical Left after the 15M Indignados movement has been fascinating. The current organisational landscape has been shaped by 1) the staunch stance of United Left about its own survival in the face of the business-like modus operandi of the growth-thirsty leaders of Podemos, 2) the capacity of Anti-capitalist Left/Anti-capitalists to act and adapt rapidly and 3) the inclusiveness and effectiveness of the Platforms, who have not dropped the baton of participatory democracy that they took from the 15M Indignados Movement.

The intensive use of social media is a decisive factor that triggered and enabled substantial transformations that cannot be regarded solely as a continuation of the political struggles and dilemmas of earlier movements. The new role of these political organisations challenges assumptions about mobilisation and traditional ways of political articulation. It also provides a rich texture for the study of more contemporary phenomena such as populism.

In a forthcoming article in *New Politics* (*New Politics* #60 Winter 2016), I will look at the use of new language for the redefinition of radical left wing demands. I will also reflect upon the use of language as an element of the political identity of the Indignados political movement in the context of some of the recent processes, including the creation of Podemos and its internal struggles.