

From Working-Class Anticapitalism to Populism: Theoretical Developments and Political Choices in the Birth of Podemos

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Introduction

Podemos (We Can) emerged in 2014 from the turbulent waters of the Spanish economic and political crisis of the previous years with a political message of rupture and change directed against the economic and political establishment—the caste, in the language of the party. The party was officially registered in March and the following May it had achieved a major electoral breakthrough, obtained 5 MEPs to the European parliament, and become the fourth most-voted party in the party system. In the May 2015 regional elections Podemos became the third most voted for party at the national level. In the cities of Madrid and Barcelona, the independent candidates endorsed by Podemos, in alliance with other leftist organizations, were elected majors. Finally, in the recent general elections of December 2015, Podemos, in alliance with other groups in Catalonia, Galicia, and Valencia, became the third most voted for party by obtaining 20.7% of the votes, at short distance of the Socialist Party (22%) and the Popular Party (28.7%).

The vertiginous electoral growth of Podemos went hand in hand with the use of a populist discourse, in particular, by its secretary general, Pablo Iglesias, the charismatic leader of the party.¹ Iglesias's discourse portrayed a Manichean vision of society by constantly opposing the people (*la gente* or *la gente de este país*) and “the caste” (*la casta*)², that is, the political and economic elites that occupy privileged economic and political positions and claim to represent the people through the institutional mechanisms created by the 1978 Spanish Constitution. This division between the caste and the people had a strong moral content. The caste was corrupt and narrowly self-interested, while the people represented hard-work, dignity, solidarity, and true patriotism. Podemos gave also voice to a new type of patriotism aimed at overcoming traditional distinctions between the left and right.³ Patriotic pride and dignity were not

¹ The use of Hawkins's (2009 and 2010) holistic grading technique in the analysis of the 2014 European elections discourses revealed that Iglesias's speeches were extremely populist—close to the ideal type of populist discourse (a grade of 2 in Hawkins populism score). The grading of Iglesias's discourses was conducted by Hugo Marcos and Carolina Plaza.

² The expression “the caste” was popularized in Italy by two journalists, Stella and Rizzoli (2007), to refer to the privileged status of professional politicians. “A caste of insatiable Brahmins” is the title of the first chapter of their book. Iglesias wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on social movements in Italy and Spain, and must have been very familiar with this term and its political uses.

³ Also revealing of the redefinition of political frontiers attempted by Podemos is the fact that Iglesias, in sharp contrast with the tradition of the Spanish radical left, has consistently appealed to members of the Army and the police (for instance in his speech in Malaga in April 14th 2015, in the Andalusian elections campaign).

linked to the Spanish language or ethnic particularism, but to solidarity, hard work, and care for the common good. Patriotism stood now in sharp contrast to the values of those who, notwithstanding the intensity of their Spanish (or peripheral) nationalist appeals, evaded taxes, placed their money in tax havens, and just cared about their banking accounts.⁴ These Manichean dichotomies bore intense antagonism and an initial rejection of conventional and institutionalized politics (negotiations, consensus, agreements based on mutual compromises) and legitimated the use of rhetorical radicalism in pursuit of systemic changes. In Iglesias's words, who paraphrased Marx's famous revolutionary dictum, "heavens are not taken by consensus, they are taken by assault"⁵.

The fast-paced political developments behind the creation and success of Podemos in the Spanish party system present us with several fascinating causal puzzles. The first one refers to the factors that led some political activists to articulate a populist political discourse in a country in which such a style had been mostly absent since the transition to democracy. A second puzzle relates to the fact that, in contrast to what happened in other European countries, the rise of a populist discourse in Spain was inextricably linked to theoretical transformations in the radical left camp.⁶ Finally, a third puzzle concerns the reasons that led to the rapid electoral growth of the new party and that went hand in hand with the erosion of traditional parties in Spain. In this paper we focus on the first question and examine why, how and when a group of political activists and political entrepreneurs came to adopt a populist political discourse.

⁴ The following extract reveals quite clearly this new use of patriotism: *"Y dijimos patria, y nos criticaron. Y dijimos que los que rompen España son los que tienen cuentas en Suiza o en Andorra y sean de CIU, del PP o del PSOE no tienen más patria que sus cuentas bancarias... Hablar de patria es otra cosa, es hablar de la dignidad de un pueblo, independientemente de la lengua que se hable, es hablar de que tiene que haber escuelas para que la gente pueda llevar a los niños, es hablar de que tiene que haber hospitales, es hablar de que tiene que haber los mejores profesionales sanitarios para no hacer el ridículo. Eso es sentirte orgulloso de tu país, sentirte orgulloso de tener las mejores escuelas públicas, sentirte orgulloso de tener los mejores hospitales."* (Opening speech in the 2014 Asamblea Ciudadana, pending translation).

⁵ *"El cielo no se toma por consenso, el cielo se toma por asalto."* (Opening speech in the 2014 Asamblea Ciudadana).

⁶ The initial combination of left radicalism and populism in the case of Podemos shows some similarities with other parties in Europe, in particular Syriza. Yet the Greek coalition born in 2004 almost took a decade to travel the road to populism (Stavakrakis and Katsambekis 2014). Instead, Podemos' birth is inextricably linked to the populist project or 'hypothesis', to use the term coined by some of its founders. Interestingly its populist discourse soon sought to distance itself in significant respects from the radical left programmatic agenda.

Our analysis provides an account of the mapping and reception of initially marginal ideas in the Spanish radical left scenario. It explains the choice of a populist discourse by the leaders of the new party as the result of intellectual and ideological developments that took place among some radical-left social science scholars and activists. Crucial for these intellectual developments were the perceived shortcomings and failures of Marxist political theory and political groups, the vitality of populist transformative movements in Latin America, and the perception that Laclau' and Mouffe's theory on the power of populist discourse was much more useful for radical political transformations than any contemporary variant of Marxism. The combined presence of these analyses led to launch *Podemos* as a populist project. Particularly important in this respect were the learning processes and theoretical reflections developed by one of the founders of Podemos, Íñigo Errejón, whose scholarly and political texts displayed a radical and early transformation towards populist politics. . Therefore, in our view populist discourse did not arise out of intuitive or strictly pragmatic political considerations, but it was triggered by a set of ideas and theoretical developments among leftist activists which in turn derived from both the crisis of Marxist theory and the experience of Latin American populist movements. Now, the social appeal and electoral success of the new populist discourse was made possible by a context marked by the perfect storm experienced by Spanish society in recent years (intense economic and political representation crises and strong waves of social mobilizations against adjustment policies and the lack of responsiveness of the political class). The 'populist hypothesis' developed by some political activists became now a useful tool to mobilize and organize a new political actor.

Our hypothesis is that, in the context of a widespread cycle of social mobilization, activists of the radical left were in need of new ideas and understandings to transform multi-class and cross-partisan social unrest into political action. Populist theories became a tool for the political action of the so far electorally negligible and organizationally fragmented Spanish radical left. The success of the 2014 European elections confirmed the fruitfulness of these ideas, and triggered the institutionalization of Podemos as a party and its posterior attempts to attain a central position in the Spanish political chessboard.⁷

⁷ The combination of radical left programmatic proposals and populist discourse became afterwards more challenging for Podemos's founders, as shifts towards programmatic moderation clashed with the orientations of more traditional anticapitalist sectors within the party.

This is a case study in which we apply a process tracing perspective in order to describe and explain historical processes (George and McKeown 1985, George and Bennet 2005, Collier 2011, Beach et al. 2012). Our goal is to identify the causal processes that led from an initial situation in which populist discourse was mostly absent to one in which a political group channeling new social and political demands adopted a political discourse.

Our analysis aims at offering a first approach to the unfolding of the events that led to the development of a populist discourse by the founders of Podemos. This analysis is based on different observations (regarding socioeconomic, political-institutional and, in particular, ideological and theoretical developments) that are critical to the identification of causal processes leading to the outcome of populist discourse. For this analysis it is critical to identify the first manifestations of populist frames, ideology, or discourse in the groups or individuals that participated in the formation of the political actor we are analyzing. It is also critical to understand (in the Weberian sense), the aspirations and the learning processes (intellectual as well as political) by virtue of which some radical left, Marxist or post-Marxist political activists, came to adopt a populist discourse. Our interpretation of these causal processes rests on several counterfactual arguments that will have to be elaborated in more detail in future research and that concern the plausible effects that alternative values for several critical independent variables (socioeconomic and party system crises, ideological developments, populist experiences in Latin America, etc.) would have had for the development of a populist discourse in Spain. At the least, at this stage of research we expect our analysis to work as the “hoop test” in Collier’s presentation of process-tracing studies, that is, as a test that will allow us to affirm the plausibility of our explanatory hypothesis.

In the first section of this paper we present the political and economic context in which the evolution towards populism of some radical left activists took place. This facilitating context was triggered by the debt crisis and the policies adopted by the Socialist government at the time. These developments initiated a cycle of social mobilization in Spanish’s main cities under the banner of the 15M movement, and opened up the political opportunity structure for the rise of Podemos. The second section describes the foundation of Podemos as the result of the confluence of different political groups and activists. A minor radical left radical party of Trotskyite origins, *Izquierda Anticapitalista*, and a group of political scientists from the Universidad Complutense with strong connections with Venezuelan Chavism, converged in a new

political project that heavily relied on the presence on the media of their future leader, Pablo Iglesias. Finally, in our third section we move back in time in order to examine the development of populist ideas among the founders of Podemos. This process involved both theoretical transformations and innovative reflections on the application of populist discourses in Spain. We conclude by highlighting the main findings of this exploration.

1. The window of opportunities: Economic crisis, Socialist policy shift and social mobilization

In May the 12th, 2010, the Socialist Spanish government presided over by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced in parliament a severe austerity package that reduced public expenditures by 1.5% of the GDP. This package followed the escalation of the debt crisis and the financial rescue of the Greek economy in April-May 2010. It also responded to the rapidly growing pressures exercised by European governments on the Spanish government to adopt severe fiscal consolidation measures, most notoriously, in the 9 May ECOFIN meeting. In that meeting, the Spanish Economic Affairs Minister, Elena Salgado, agreed to adopt a deficit reduction plan that would be presented to the ECOFIN in its May 18th meeting.⁸ In 2009 the Spanish economy had experienced a very severe downturn. Its GDP had fallen by 3.9% and its unemployment level had reached almost 19%. But the economic fall had been reduced to -0.15% in the last trimester of 2009, and it had turned into positive figures (0.3%) in the first trimester of 2010. In 2009 the public deficit equaled 11.9%, a result of the anti-cyclical and expansive economic policies followed during that year, and its public debt amounted to 55.2% of the GDP. Following the 9 May ECOFIN meeting, the Spanish government would switch its economic policies from expansion to austerity.

The package announced by President Rodríguez Zapatero included a wage reduction in 2010 (5% on average) and a salary freeze the year 2011 for public employees. It froze public pensions in the year 2011 (with the exception of minimal and non-contributive pensions), and eliminated the financial aid of 2500 Euros to parents of newborn babies.

⁸ See http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ecofin/114324.pdf.

Economic reforms aiming at fiscal consolidation would continue under the Rodríguez Zapatero government. In 2010, Spanish parliament approved a reform of labor regulations that increased flexibility and decentralization in labor markets. Among other things, this reform decreased the costs of dismissing employees and allowed firms to opt out of agreements signed between business representatives and labor unions at the branch level. Economic and institutional reforms continued during the year 2011. During that year the public pension scheme was reformed. Retirement age was moved from 65 to 67 years (although this change would take place incrementally over a long period of time), and the period of time used to calculate pensions jumped from 15 to 25 years. Finally, in the summer of 2011, in the face of an escalating debt crisis, the Socialist and Popular parties agreed to conduct an urgent constitutional reform that imposed balanced budgets. These ambitious reforms did not bring economic recovery. The Spanish economy grew by 0.2% in 2010 and -0.6% in 2011, and the unemployment rate rose to 20.1% in 2010 and 22.6% in 2011. Among people younger than 25 years old, the unemployment rate in 2010 was higher than 40%⁹

Overall, as President Rodríguez Zapatero himself later acknowledged (Rodríguez Zapatero 2014), these reforms implied a strong departure from the policies advocated by Socialist governments from the 1980's onwards. They led to a strong sense of alienation on the part of important segments of the Socialist electorate. From 2008 to 2011 the percentage of voters for the Socialist party in the general elections dropped from 43.9 to 28.7% percent, and the absolute number of socialist voters fell by more than 4 millions.

Almost in parallel way, the perception of political corruption increased drastically from 2008 onwards (Villoria and Jiménez 2012). This perception was fuelled by scandals and judicial processes implicating politicians and political parties. They started at the local and regional levels, and quite often in connection with the housing bubble and the funding of political parties, from which some entrepreneurs and politicians also extracted generous kickbacks. In some cases, corruption scandals linked political parties, regional governments and mismanaged financial institutions (such as Bankia) that were eventually rescued at a high economic price with public funding. Interestingly, this perception was mostly focused on politicians and authorities, and did

⁹ See https://www.bbvaresearch.com/KETD/fbin/mult/WP_1130_tcm346-270043.pdf?ts=2152012.

not relate to the perceptions citizens had of their everyday experiences of citizens with the public administration (Villoria and Jiménez 2012: 119-120)

In this social and economic context, a bottom-up wave of social mobilizations erupted in the year 2011 (Mora 2012; Minguijón Pablo y Pac Salas 2013). In May 15th, one week before the date of regional and local elections in which the Popular Party would attain a landslide victory, *Democracia Real Ya*, a grassroots social organization integrating a diverse array of social movements and networks called for a popular demonstration in protest for unemployment, cuts in social expenditures, and privileges of the political class, and also in demand of new democratic channels for civic participation. Protests crystallized in permanent camp-outs all over the Spanish geography that would last in some cases until August 2011. Although protesters camping out had a distinctive social and ideological profile (young people with a high overrepresentation of college graduates and leftist oriented participants) (Calvo, Gómez-Pastrana, and Mena 2011; Minguijón Pablo y Pac Salas 2013), this wave of social mobilizations had transversal characteristics and appealed to people with quite diverse previous political sympathies. Protests against political corruption and the oligopolistic character of Spanish parties, and demands in defense of social services and the welfare state had a wide appeal among Spanish citizens. According to different surveys (Calvo, Gómez-Pastrana and Mena 2011: 5), in 2011 more than 70% percent of Spaniards felt sympathy for the 15-M movement and its demands.

In the November 2011 general elections, the Popular Party attained an absolute majority of seats in parliament. Rajoy's conservative government continued the austerity policies initiated under Rodríguez Zapatero. It maintained the freeze on public sector wages, contracted public employment, and increased direct and indirect taxes. It also approved a labor law reform that drastically reduced compensations for dismissals and increased flexibility and decentralization in wage negotiations and labor conditions¹⁰. Economic reforms did not manage to reduce Spanish unemployment rates, which escalated above 25% by the end of 2012 and remained above that threshold level until mid-2014. Public trust on President Rajoy suffered also from poor economic performance. By early 2013, surveys conducted by Metroscopia indicated that more

¹⁰ See <http://www.oecd.org/els/emp/SpainLabourMarketReform-Report.pdf>

than 80% of citizens did not trust President Rajoy¹¹. By mid-2013, according to the same polling agency, 60% of PP voters did not trust President Rajoy¹².

By the end of 2013, the combination of unpopular economic measures and deep economic crisis had triggered a strong sense of discontent and political alienation among many Spanish citizens. That feeling was especially acute among former socialist voters, who had witnessed the sharp policy switch made by the Rodríguez Zapatero government, a switch whose economic benefits were very hard to grasp for most Spanish citizens. Bornschier's comparative work on the determinants of successful populist strategies (2015) has shown that party system unresponsiveness favors the emergence of populist challengers. In Spain, the dramatic drop in Socialist responsiveness in the economic left-right dimension created a favorable scenario for the emergence of new political actors, despite the strong constraints that the Spanish electoral system puts on electoral breakthroughs by newcomers.

Now, which were main programmatic and discursive alternatives that were available to new contenders in party competition, and which were the chances of electoral success? In order to address the main ideological and programmatic alternatives opened to political actors we can use Kriesi et al's analysis on effects of globalization on the transformation of party competition in Western Europe. We assume that despite the presence of important conjunctural and national particularities, Kriesi et al's map captures crucial dimensions of the spaces of public opinion and party positions in Spain. If anything, the intensity of the economic crisis, and the depth of its social and political-economic effects should have increased the perceived importance of globalization among Spanish citizens. In addition to the two dimensions identified by Kriesi et al, the analysis of Spanish politics will have to take into consideration the role played by "center-periphery" conflicts, which have evolved around the autonomy and symbolic recognition of peripheral nationalities.

Kriesi et al's analyses show that in the last decades West European party systems have become organized around two main axis of party competition, one economic and one cultural. In both of them, the prevailing tension pits advocates and opponents of globalization. In some national cases, this transformation has gone hand in hand with a tripolarization of the political space. The three poles are occupied by a libertarian left (pro-integration in the cultural dimension and pro-demarcation in the

¹¹ See http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/01/12/actualidad/1358017058_376467.html

¹² http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/09/14/actualidad/1379177988_228092.html

economic dimension), a liberal right (pro-integration in both dimensions) and a populist right (pro-demarcation in the cultural dimension) (Lachat and Kriesi 2008: 277-278). In the context of a deep and unsettling economic crisis, many citizens could embrace the defense of the welfare state against austerity policies and of Spanish sovereignty and national solidarity against supranational or foreign impositions. Populist radical right groups adopting a pro-welfare state strategy would have been particularly well located to channel these types of positions. However, the Spanish popular right has never abandoned a situation of political and electoral marginality (Llamazares and Ramiro 2007; Llamazares 2012), a fact that can hardly be explained by the absence of anti-globalization attitudes (in particular regarding immigration and multiculturalism) among Spanish citizens. Much more important to explain the failure of the Spanish populist right have been other characteristics of both the demand- and supply-sides of Spanish politics. The overwhelming gravitational pull of conflicts regarding the autonomy and status of Catalonia and the Basque country has made it more difficult for new groups to center their political platforms around the issues of immigration and/ European integration. Furthermore, the anti-accommodation position adopted by the PP in center-periphery conflicts has given this party a strong competitive advantage vis a vis other potential groups advocating Spanish nationalism (Llamazares and Ramiro 2007; Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014). At the supply-side level, Spanish extreme right groups have failed to get rid of their Francoist and/or neofascist symbols and identities. They have not managed to articulate radically new nationalist positions, and have therefore failed to appeal to working-class voters, which have remained hostile or reluctant at the best to the ideological inheritors of the Francoist regime (Llamazares 2012). As for the PP, it has embraced conservative positions regarding cultural and moral issues such as abortion and gay marriage, and it has flirted with anti-immigration positions, but it has never adopted Euroskeptic positions, and had not campaigned on anti-immigration or anti-multicultural platforms.

The political conditions in the potential space of the libertarian left have been quite different. The main national competitor at this side of the political space has been the Socialist Party. Despite its quite moderate economic policies, the Socialist Party had played a decisive role in the development of the Spanish welfare state. Now, the policy switch adopted by Rodríguez Zapatero's government drastically reduced the credibility of the Socialist Party as a defender of the welfare state. Furthermore, the perceived effects of both the debt crisis and the austerity policies induced by the EU this situation

transformed the interpretation of economic conflicts and dilemmas along the lines identified by Kriesi et al, that is, as a conflict between economic globalization and the defense of national welfare states. As for radical left organizations, they have been present at the electoral and institutional arena at both the Spanish (IU-United Left-) and regional levels (particularly in the Basque country, in Galicia in Catalonia and Valencia). These organizations have tended to adopt a left libertarian profile, emphasizing in different degrees their redistributionist, libertarian or, in the case of peripheral nationalist groups, independentist positions. In many cases, they have benefited electorally from the collapse of the Socialist Party. In fact, during the years 2012 and 2013 conditions seemed very favorable to IU, and surveys previewed a huge increase in the electoral results of this group.

However, some factors constrained the political chances of the radical left in general and of IU in particular. In the first place, their long political and institutional experiences (in some cases as members of regional or local coalition governments) was not very helpful at the nadir of popular credibility in political parties and professional politicians. In the second place, the economic crisis had made less important and/or disorganized preexisting patterns of ideological opposition. The left (PSOE) and right (PP) had conducted similar austerity economic policies, and these policies had hit all kinds of social groups, in particular those sheltered by the welfare state, irrespective of their previous ideological and political orientations. The transversal and bottom-up character of 15-m mobilizations both revealed the limits of the traditional left-right frame that had structured Spanish politics and the weak legitimacy of all institutionalized political actors. In the third place, as Hawkins's analyses have shown (Hawkins 2010), the high political corruption created a fertile soil for populist political alternatives. In the words of a leader of *Podemos*, traditional left-right conflicts had been overcome by a new tension between those who are up, the elites, and those who are down, the people, irrespective of their old ideological orientations.

This context was propitious for the emergence of new political alternatives in Spanish politics. Unlike other West European party systems, Spain lacked new parties, libertarian left, populist radical right, along the lines of the new cleavages formed over the past decades.

This context was propitious for alternatives that arose outside the realm of official politics, and that advocated the defense of the welfare state and the rejection of supranational impositions on national policies. These alternatives could appeal to those

wide sectors of society that had been severely hit by the crisis. And they could frame the demands of these sectors in a new vocabulary, one that pitted social and political elites to common citizens. This alternative could therefore be based in a new combination of economic demands (pro-welfare state and pro-redistribution, connected to classical leftist platforms, but framed now in a different vocabulary) and populist appeals directed against the political elites. In the following section, we turn to the process by virtue of which this new political alternative took shape.

2. The foundation of Podemos. Communicational and organizational steps and party creation.

While the manifest *Mover Ficha* was launched in January 14th, 2014, the movement *Podemos* was officially presented in a press conference in the Teatro del Barrio in the neighborhood of Lavapiés in Madrid three days later, in January 17th, 2014. The occasion to present the movement was the political manifest ‘*Mover Ficha*’ (Make a Move, January 14th). The first steps to launch a new party were outlined by Miguel Urbán, now MEP and the candidate of *Podemos* to preside the Autonomous Community of Madrid in the May 25th 2015 elections. They would collect 50.000 signatures through the web to endorse Pablo Iglesias, the future leader of the organization, in the next European elections. Second, they would upload documents and material on a webpage for debate among potential followers. Then, they would create assemblies and support groups in neighborhoods and towns across the entire geography. As for their financial resources, Urbán claimed at the Assembly that ‘their candidature was born with 0 euros’.¹³ Several procedures would be open for supporters to collaborate with economic resources to help the electoral campaign.¹⁴

The political manifest ‘*Mover Ficha*’ was originally an internal document from *Izquierda Anticapitalista*, Anticapitalist Left, a minority radical left political party born in 2008. *Izquierda Anticapitalista* defined itself as ‘revolutionary, anticapitalist,

¹³ "Nace con cero euros: cero euros de la banca que queremos expropiar y cero euros de los políticos que queremos echar".

¹⁴ "Igual que a la derecha la financian constructores y banqueros, y con ellos tienen sus lealtades, nosotros nos vamos a financiar a través de los ciudadanos y con ellos está nuestra lealtad".

internationalist, feminist and socialist organization'.¹⁵ It had run in the 2009 European elections with very poor results obtaining no representation (19.880 votes, 0.13%). The party was, however, very active among the many groups and organizations that participated in the 15-M. An article published on 21 January 2014 on a national newspaper revealed that the Manifest that launched Podemos was, in fact, largely based on a previous internal document of the party (bulletin n.82).¹⁶ Both texts had striking similarities in their content. The bulletin of *Izquierda Anticapitalista* also ended with the same statement that later made the name of *Podemos* well-known:

The signatories of this Manifest are convinced that this is the moment to make a step forward. Indignation and new forms of participation must also reach out to politics. In the streets it is repeated 'Yes it can be. We say: We can'. (*Sí se puede. Nosotros decimos: Podemos*).

'Si se puede' became the motto to organize the party and gather popular support. The list of signatories of the Manifest gathered members of Anticapitalist Left (Jaime Pastor, Teresa Rodriguez later elected as MEP, and now a member of the Andalusian regional parliament), activists from social movements (*Marea blanca*—health--, *Marea verde*—education--, several leftist intellectuals (Jorge Riechmann), and trade unionists. However, the main leaders of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, Íñigo Errejón and Carolina Bescansa, did not sign the manifest.

Beyond the direct link between *Izquierda Anticapitalista*, there were other factors conducive to the launching of the party. Unquestionably 15M was the fulcrum for political change. Podemos and the 15M movement were two separate political processes, a social movement gathering very different groups the former, and a new political party the latter. They appeared in sequence but their connection, although loosely, exists. Many activists in Podemos had previously participated in the activities of the 15M. Leaders of Podemos (for example, Íñigo Errejón and Pablo Iglesias) claimed that the 15M was a founding experience and that it made possible the birth of a new political scenario, even if its character was completely different to that of Podemos.

¹⁵ Its origins go back to the organization of Alternative Space in 1995, and it was created by old members of the Liga Comunista Revolucionaria. It was articulated as an internal current within Izquierda Unida until it left the latter in 2007.

¹⁶ A. Gil, *El Diario* (date).

The 15M definitely inspired many activists to become involved in politics and to make a step forward.¹⁷

In addition, the confluence between a radical left party and a group of researchers from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid who had collaborated with the Foundation CEPS (Centro de Estudios Políticos y Sociales) took place. CEPS is a foundation linked to the Universidad Complutense de Madrid that defines itself as ‘a political organization (not a party) dedicated to the production of critical thinking and cultural and intellectual work to build consensus among the left.’ CEPS has been involved in different types of research but in its 15 years of existence, the foundation has developed different projects in Latin America, including Venezuela. Future leaders of Podemos, in particular Juan Carlos Monedero, but also Pablo Iglesias, Carolina Bescansa, Iñigo Errejón and Luis Aguilar, participated as advisers and strategic analysts in different projects with the populist Chaves’ government.¹⁸

The confluence between the radical left *Izquierda Anticapitalista* and the populist advisors, beyond personal and academic connections, crystallized through the media. *La Tuerka* (the Nut), a TV program created in 2010, broadcasted through first local TVs and then internet, served as a political talk show for some of the members of the Complutense team in order to advance their political proposals and denounce the political class and the incumbent government. Pablo Iglesias, an adjunct assistant professor at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, was the anchor and director of a program of political debate that gathered some of the later key figures of Podemos. Beyond *la Tuerka*, Iglesias’ was able to access the mass media in several TV private channels. The first time was a short participation on the program *la Noria* (Cuatro) in 2011, without consequences for his political career. The conservative channel *Intereconomía* invited him to participate in its talk shows in 2013. His first appearance took place on April 25th 2013. Allegedly they were looking for someone with a leftist profile, but not a professional politician or journalist (he was introduced as someone

¹⁷ In addition to the movement 15M, there were other experiences endorsing these political moves, such as *Promotora de Pensamiento Crítico* born in 2008, and the foundation CEPS from the Universidad Complutense. The organization *Contrapoder* did not support Iglesias as an organization, but some of its members did.

¹⁸ The connection with Chaves has been one of the Achilles’ heels of the movement since the press and the rest of political parties have denounced their poor democratic credentials on these grounds. The foundation CEPS has refused the allegations of payments to Juan Carlos Monedero for the amount of 1m€. Estimates of the amount of money received from the foundation from Venezuela since 2002 are 3.7m€. (*Add source*)

close to the 15M movement). Until the fall of that year, he was invited several times to participate in their talk shows. Later he was invited to participate in the *tertulias*-talk shows- of Cuatro and la Sexta as a main protagonist in political debates. From then on, Pablo Iglesias was born as a *tertuliano*, a talk show guest representing an alternative political discourse. With his characteristic ponytail and soft manners, Iglesias soon became a well-known and increasingly public figure.

After the public launching of the movement in January, Podemos was officially registered in March 11th 2014 as a political party. The party campaigned in European elections mainly based on social networks. *Izquierda Anticapitalista* purposefully supported the political project under the banner of *Podemos* while recognizing the nature of the political confluence among what they consider as two separate souls (Bulletin 84, March 5th, 2014). Two months before the European elections, an internal document of *Izquierda Anticapitalista* stated:

We are aware that we are launching an initiative with a populist political culture, but they have a significant convening power, influence and popularity.

The first electoral list to the European elections was made using the tools later developed by the organization: the web and the circles. In principle the election was defined as citizens' primaries (a total of 33.165 people participated). Since the Project was launched in January, it was already backed up by 100.000 people and around 200 Círculos (circles, the name of the party branches) were constituted. Iglesias and its team decided to launch a participatory process both to open up the selection of candidates and elaborate an electoral program for the European elections. Pablo Iglesias was elected as number one on a separate list while another list was elaborated for the rest of the candidates with a quota system that granted that both male and women candidates would alternate in the final list of candidates. A small coordinating team organized by Iñigo Errejón was in charge of the electoral campaign.

3. The ideological antecedents: learning processes and discursive transformations in the radical left space. “The populist hypothesis.”

We can trace the different ideas and ideological currents that influenced, and eventually inspired, the ideas that led to the rise of Podemos. Here we distinguish between academic writings and political articles. Timing is crucial to understand the different focus and context in which the pieces we analyzed were written during the last decade. Some of the founders of Podemos wrote their dissertations in the late 2000s. The political articles we analyze here were published when the Spanish economic and political crisis had already initiated.

Among the activists behind the creation of Podemos, Iñigo Errejón played a leading role in the theoretical diffusion of Laclau’s theory on populism, although as one of the participants noted, ‘he did not initially make a concrete proposal for Spain’. As we indicate below, his proposals for Europe started to take form in the journal *Viento Sur*, one of the main sources of political thinking of the radical left in 2011. This populist schema did not aim to be a mechanic adaptation of Latin American populist experiences, Errejón’s initial interest, given the presence of strong differences between the Spanish and Latin American political scenarios. Rather, it was an attempt to place the people at the center of political discourse.

The political socialization and activism of the main leaders of *Podemos* had consistently taken place in the ideological space of the radical-left, an environment in which Marxist social and political theory (or rather, different versions of it) had consistently prevailed. This socialization took place institutionally and academically in the Schools of Political Science and Philosophy at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. The fact that some of the main leaders of Podemos were trained as scholars in the social sciences and wrote pieces of academic work (for instance, Ph.D. dissertations) and theoretically grounded texts of political intervention allows us to trace at least partially their ideological and theoretical trajectories. By focusing on the scholarly work of these political activists, we can identify some crucial steps in the evolution of some of the leaders of Podemos towards a populist political discourse. The analysis of some of their writings suggests that it was mainly Iñigo Errejón (responsible for the political secretariat of Podemos), who had studied in more depth populist phenomena and

embraced Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical and political interpretation of this phenomenon in the early 2010s.

Before then, a number of contributions along different Marxist currents were made. In 2008, Luis Alegre, a lecturer of philosophy at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, and general secretary of the Madrid party branch, defended his Ph.D. dissertation on the concepts of class and citizenship in Karl Marx. No references to Laclau, Mouffe or the concept of populism were present in that text, a philosophical and theoretical exercise focusing on Marx's *Capital*. Pablo Iglesias wrote his political science Ph.D. dissertation on postnational, antiglobalization and anti-system social movements in Europe, with a special focus on Italy and Spain. The main theoretical frameworks on which this work was based were Wallerstein's world-systems theory and the Italian based stream of autonomist Marxism (Iglesias 2008: 168). Consistently with its theoretical founding, Iglesias's dissertation focused on the influence that capitalist globalization and transformations in labor and production processes exerted on the emergence of new social groups and insurgent or disruptive political subjects. Also crucial for Iglesias's work were Negri and Hardt's analyses on the development of empire and the emergence of multitude. Laclau's and Mouffe's contribution played a marginal work, if anything, in Iglesias's analysis, even if Iglesias referred to Laclau's work on populism when he pointed out that leaders play a critical role in the development of interpretative frameworks even in the types of movements his work analyzed (Iglesias 2008: 112-113). However, to the extent that the relationships between socioeconomic structures, ideology, and political discourse were present in Iglesias's dissertation, they were framed in a basically orthodox Gramscian vocabulary. Neither did the other dissertations written by leaders of Podemos (Gemma Ubasart's 2008 political science dissertation on emergency state responses to disruptive political action in Europe, and Eduardo Maura's 2011 philosophy dissertation on Walter Benjamin) address or use theoretical frameworks focusing on populist phenomena or discourse.

The absence of theories on populism is more striking in works that specifically addressed Latin American experiences. Even political essays praising the Chavist political experience, like Fernández Liria's and Alegre's *Comprender Venezuela* (2006), avoided the use of Laclau's theoretical framework and the defense of populism in the interpretation of the Bolivarian revolution. This work linked the chavista political experience to the emancipatory projects of enlightenment and Marxism, and claimed

that the Bolivarian revolution was the most successful instance of state of law in the Kantian tradition. This fact is quite interesting, in so far as it reveals that the political interest and solidarity raised by the Bolivarian revolution among some leftist activists was not followed at all by the interest to theoretically explore or political apply the discursive elements of Latin American populist movements.

Quite different in character was Errejón's political science dissertation on the construction of political and discursive hegemony in Bolivia during the first MAS government. Errejón's work dedicated its three main theoretical chapters to the construction of hegemony through political discourse, mostly drawing on Gramscian ideas that he interpreted, with some limitations and caveats, through Laclau's and Mouffe's lenses (Errejón 2012: 227). Following Laclau, Errejón's work emphasized the contingent character of the construction of political discourses and identities, but it also underscored, to some extent in contrast to Laclau's and Mouffe's ideas, the fact that such contingent processes were constrained by both socioeconomic structures and preexisting cultural elements and practices (Errejón 2012: 227-228). These constraints had to be read as conditions of possibility, verisimilitude and truthfulness for populist discursive appeals and identities (Errejón 2012: 228-229). In this respect, Errejón's approach remained closer to core elements of the Gramscian interpretation of Marxism. Errejón's work paid especial attention too to the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the concept of "pueblo" as a result of the constructed equivalence of multiple grievances and demands. Under conditions of state crisis, this political process could crystallize in the antagonistic constitution of "pueblo", in opposition to both elites and the status quo (Errejón 2012: 233). His analysis identified several crucial steps in the construction of a hegemonic populist discourse: the characterization of the victims of injustice, the division of the political community in two poles, and the identification between the people and the general interest (Errejón 2012: 440). Building a successful populist discourse involved identifying a "winning dimension" that could allow to rally popular demands and grievances, setting morally loaded, Manichean frontiers between and in- and out-group (the people versus the white elites and multinational companies in Bolivia) (443 and 452-453), finding a term (an empty signifier) that could aggregate popular grievances ("Pueblo" in the Bolivian case) (446) and facilitate a mythical and historicist reconstruction of the people (459), and finally proposing a simple and feasible solution to national problems (460).

We distinguish between the pieces of academic writing analyzed above from the scarce, but relevant, texts of political intervention that followed in the midst of the economic and social crisis. At first, populism was addressed in an article by Miguel Urbán, from Izquierda Anticapitalista and currently a member of the European parliament from Podemos, which was published in 2010 in *Viento Sur* under the title ‘A Europe in Crisis, an extreme right on the rise’. However, this analysis was limited to analyzing the experience of the populist radical right and did not transcend the classical frame of Marxist theory. In this article, Urbán highlighted the main characteristics of the new populism and in particular the populist emphasis on the antagonism between the people and the elite. Interestingly, the following year Errejón published two articles in *Viento Sur* on the subject of populism, the first one synthesizing his knowledge from Latin America, the second speculating with the adoption of populism in the Spanish case.¹⁹ Paradoxically, no debate on populism and its combination with left or right wing politics emerged.

Errejón’s interpretation of populist movements was much more daring, and became three years later the intellectual core of Podemos’ political project. In his two 2011 articles in *Viento Sur*, Errejón explored the meanings of populism, the limitations of the European left, and the possibilities opened in Europe for different types of populist movements. For Errejón, the defining characteristic of populism was the antagonism between the people and the elites (2011a: 82-83). Both terms (the people and the elites) lacked any specific content, and were therefore open to new assignments of meaning by political actors (2011a: 82-83). What was crucial was finding a “winning dimension,” a demand or that could lead to a successful dichotomization of the political space (2011a: 82-83). The weakness of the European left in general and of the Spanish left in particular should be understood in fact as a result of its adoption of the liberal and pluralist creed and of its renunciation to political antagonism. In a context characterized by social unease and capitalist individualism, xenophobic, radical-right populism could become the only alternative for the expression of grievances for many Europeans. What was needed was the reenactment of intense political antagonisms through a morally loaded dichotomization of society. In his 2015 debate with Mouffe, after the success of Podemos, Errejón remarked the crucial role of passions and emotions, even

¹⁹ The editor of *Viento Sur* acknowledged that Errejón’s intentions were to follow up these two articles with a special issue on populism but his proposal was not finally considered (personal interview).

acknowledging the masterful use that radical right movements make of these crucial elements of political action (Errejón and Mouffe 2015: 58-59 and 61).

Errejón's analyses from 2011 did not offer a specific guideline for action. They also pointed out some of the limitations that a leftist populist discourse would face in Spain. Critical among them was the fact that the multinational character of Spain had made it very difficult to use the concept of "pueblo" in an emancipatory way (2011b: 111). In fact, as Errejon pointed in his 2015 debate with Mouffe, words and slogans had to be empirically tested, and used on the basis of their mobilization power.²⁰ Given the multinational character of Spanish society, the politicization of peripheral cultures, and the uses Francoism made of the terms *nación* (nation) and *pueblo*, these words had to be discarded. Instead of them, the term *gente* (also people, but less politically loaded, and with more pluralistic connotations), or the expression *gente de este país* (people of this country) had to be used, always in opposition to the privileged or the "casta" (the caste) (Errejón and Mouffe 2015: 126).

Eventually Errejón's reconstruction of the populist discursive processes by virtue of which MAS had reached hegemony in Bolivia would serve as a map for the articulation of a populist discourse in Spain. No longer a Ph.D. candidate but a key political figure within Podemos and an interlocutor with Chantal Mouffe, Errejón himself narrates how his theoretical and political views were transformed by his study of popular movements in Latin America, all differences between Europe and Latin America notwithstanding (Errejón and Mouffe 2015: 70-71). His first ideological steps were strongly influenced by autonomist Marxism first and by Gramsci then, and his first militant commitments took place in anti-globalization movements (Errejón and Mouffe 2015: 72). It was the contact with Latin American politics in 2006 what changed his political views and led him to study and interpret popular discourses and movements (Errejón and Mouffe 2015: 73)²¹.

The 'populist hypothesis' was not the subject of intense debate or exchange of ideas in printed press. Rather, it was part of discussions in seminars and courses (among

²⁰ "Hemos sido creo muy laicos en el uso de términos, *hemos probado y hemos visto que términos podían movilizar o podían articular* que tipo de intereses, o qué tipo de anhelos..." (Errejón and Mouffe 2015: 126).

²¹ Errejón's analysis was not influenced by the interest of another founder of Podemos, Juan Carlos Monedero, senior lecturer at the Universidad Complutense, on the politics of the Chavist revolution. No publication of Monedero's is quoted or referred to in Errejón's lengthy dissertation (more than 600 pages that include more than 50 pages of references).

its participants were Jaime Pastor, Ariel Jerez, Errejón...) at the Universidad Complutense. Errejón was the main theorizer of the “populist hypothesis,” which was articulated between 2011 and 2012 and which took off with the launching of Podemos in January 2014. The influence of Errejón’s views among the leader of Podemos has been publicly recognized. According to Pablo Iglesias, the innovative analyses and reflections developed by Errejón gave rise to new political perspectives and stimulated politically committed researchers in the Universidad Complutense to participate in public communication arenas in order to create a new ideological hegemony. In Iglesias’s words,

“esto es una reflexión que empezó a trabajar Íñigo Errejón a partir de sus experiencias en Latinoamérica-algo que tiene que ver con la hipótesis de lo nacional-popular a la hora de construir grandes agregadores políticos... Era una discusión muy gramsciana que compartíamos, pero que Errejón llevó mucho más lejos tirando de las reflexiones de Ernesto Laclau” (Rivero 2014: 96). (pending translation)

Later on, in his debate with Chantal Mouffe, Errejón would point out that populist breakthroughs were more likely to arise in situations in which elites had stopped being able to integrate social demands and in which narratives and symbols of collective membership and identity were frail or missing (Errejón and Mouffe 2015: 89).

Finally, it did not follow from this perception of the political fruitfulness of the populist discourse that a movement articulating a populist discourse should also accept the label of “populist.” In his debate with Mouffe, Errejón pointed out that for practical reasons the term populism must be avoided in everyday politics. Populism has the connotation of demagoguery and leads to political defeat (Errejón and Mouffe 2015: 114). Even worse, in Europe some aspects of populism (intense antagonism, links between people and the nation, and inclination to strong leaderships) remind people of fascism, which also makes the populist label unacceptable and self-defeating (Errejón and Mouffe 2015: 82).

The ideological pluralism of the different currents within Podemos’ initial network of leftist activists was remarkable. The populist hypothesis was one among different analyses and diagnoses of the political context of the currents in the early 2010s in the midst of the economic crisis and austerity policies. At first, key figures in

the foundation of Podemos, such as Juan Carlos Monedero, did not defend the ‘populist hypothesis’ but later also joined it).

For some activists, the ‘populist hypothesis’ was, and still is, controversial and minoritarian within the party (Miguel Urbán). Podemos has retained a variety of activists from different currents of the radical left (not necessarily adhering to the ‘populist hypothesis’), while the populist discourse has become the political diagnose and *modus operandi* of Pablo Iglesias and his circle in their attacks against the political caste.

Now, theoretical transformations would not have had such powerful effects had it not been for the economic and political situation experienced by Spain from 2010 onwards. The debt crisis, the austerity policies, the policy switch adopted by the Rodríguez Zapatero government, and the representation crisis that followed created a window of opportunity for the impact of these ideas and the materialization of a successful populist discourse in Spanish politics. More importantly, the populist construction of us/the, in Spanish politics would require two components. Errejón emphasized that a leader was needed, a catalyst (Ada Colau, now the mayor of Barcelona, and Pablo Iglesias were considered). And careful analysis of public-surveys by another Complutense scholar and activist, Carolina Bescansa, should help to identify the chain of equivalences that was needed for the construction of a populist movement.

Conclusion

In this paper we have analyzed how a contingent combination of ideological developments, in the context of a deep economic and political crisis, led to the emergence and success of a political force embracing a populist discourse. Standard academic analyses have often focused on the extent to which certain political parties or movements are populist or articulate populist discourses. The understanding that populisms do not have an ideology and lack a systematic conception of their main ideas appears as well in many academic analyses. ‘They are about emotions and not about convictions,’ points out Delsol (2015:66). However, this case study shows that in the case of Podemos the appropriation of Laclau’s theories preceded the use of populist strategies and discourses. By embracing theoretical and political frameworks emphasizing the transformative power of populist ideas, some political entrepreneurs

located in the radical left space managed to move from marginality to the political mainstream in a short two year-span.

For good historical reasons, analyses of populist movements and parties have seldom focused on the interplay between pro-populist theoretical frameworks and populist practices and discourses. This investigation shows however, that, at least in this case, populist discursive resources were chosen on the basis of theoretical reflections and comparative political analyses. Certainly, the flows of political and personal communication linking Spain and Latin America facilitated the process of reinterpretation and innovative appropriation of Latin American populisms in Spain. However, these developments would have been much less likely had it not been for the strong crisis of Marxist social theory and radical left political actors. In the face of this crisis, an alternative program of radical, politically oriented social research, to borrow Lakatos's terminology, became extraordinarily attractive not only to interpret but also to anticipate, performatively in this case a powerful populist political discourse. Furthermore, the fact that the populist intellectual breakthrough was initially articulated by just one political science scholar, Íñigo Errejón, the current secretary of organization of Podemos, suggests that individual intellectual reflections and learning processes played a key role in the first development of populist ideas in Spain.

It is impossible to assess with precision what was the impact of such changes on the political and electoral scenarios. We can imagine however that these transformations were at the least a critical factor contributing to the emergence of a new key party, to the realignment of the Spanish electorate, and last but not least, to the irruption of new political proposals and styles in the Spanish political arena, often in strong opposition to the prevailing political and institutional status quo. It has been often shown how strictly social and political analyses fall short of their goal of interpreting the true meaning of intellectual works (see for instance Gordon's reflections on Bourdieu's analysis of Martin Heidegger) (Gordon 2012: 351-354). What is more remarkable in this case is that theoretical and ideological transformations had perceptible effects on the transformation of the Spanish political scenario.

The history of political ideas provides us with some interesting parallels between the process of theoretical transformation that led to the rise of a populist Podemos and the reinterpretation of Marxism that Georges Sorel conducted at the beginning of the 20th century-- even if the latter led to even more unimaginable political-ideological outcomes. In the case of Sorel, the perception of theoretical failure and political

weakness of economicist and determinist Marxism, in combination with the emergence of new ideas in the social sciences and psychology, led to a new emphasis on the role of emotions and myths in politics. In that case, the myths of general strike and violence should lead to the generation of intense social antagonisms that were absolutely necessary to start radical social transformations. As Sternhell points out (1995: 57), “not the scientific method but ‘social myths’ would enable the existing difficulties of socialism to be overcome.” In Sorel’s interpretation, even Marx’s *Capital* should be interpreted as an “apocalyptic text...created for the purpose of molding consciousness” with radical political goals (as quoted in Sternhell 1995: 56). In the case of some of the founders of Podemos, the perception of the crisis of Marxism and of the political failure of the radical left led also to the adoption a new theoretical framework and to new discursive and political practices. These new practices aimed also at the manipulation of cultural elements (myths, emotions, discursive mechanisms) in order to generate intense and politically winning social antagonisms.

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