

Ten years after 15M in the Spanish state: notes for the end of the cycle - “2021 is not 2011, but ...”

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In the spring of 2021 it is difficult, no matter how hard we try, to recreate the particular atmosphere that began to take shape ten years ago. It has been a decade that has seemed like a century since the police charges against a group of just thirty people who had decided to spend the night in the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, after a massive demonstration protesting against the lack of democracy and neoliberal policies in response to the crisis.

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The wave of indignation had an effect of contagion that affected us all, and the next day several hundred people tried to camp in Sol. This time, the police did not dare to evacuate them. Two nights later, there were dozens of camps across the state. 15M had started.

It's a story we know very well which we experienced at first hand, but it runs the risk, even more so on this tenth anniversary, of becoming a fossilized memory, an icon of a paralyzing nostalgia that is unable to explain anything. Neither apologies nor condemnations, in their teleological aspects, are of any use in politics. Openly examining what are the differences between then and now, which similarities are due to the lack of rupture and which to forced attempts at recuperation and, above all, what has happened in these ten years, is a priority task for the entire left. Because it is true, as Daniel Bensaïd said, that we never start again at the beginning: we always start again in the middle. But there is no possible learning without systematization of experience, and it is our responsibility to arm ourselves so as not to repeat mistakes and face the next cycle in the best possible conditions. In the following paragraphs we try to contribute some ideas to this collective balance sheet.

The challenging moment

Although its meaning has ended up being mixed up with the immediately subsequent phenomenon led by the mareas, what was strictly speaking the 15M Movement had enormous potentialities (that many did not want to see at the time) and important shortcomings (that many others do not want to recognize now). More than a solidly defined movement, it was the expression of a general malaise and an organic crisis without political articulation. Strong politically advanced slogans were shared (“We are not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers” or “PSOE and PP, it's the same”) that managed to generate a leap forward in common sense and collective imaginations in a very

short time, but there was no proposal or any kind of approach with respect to power. The leading role of the movement was held by sectors of the university-educated middle classes (specifically, their impoverished daughters and sons), there were no links with the trade union world, and currently central demands such as feminism or anti-racism were secondary at best. The government, although many seem to have forgotten this, was in the hands of the PSOE, and imagining the emergence of new parties with the capacity to reshape the political map was still an impossible exercise.

The years that followed 2011 were years of constant enthusiasm and activity, an upsurge that would be the embryo of many phenomena that later developed. We owe to 15M, in its ideological aspect, the rupture with previous conceptual frameworks and common meanings, the opening of a gap in the naturalness of our political system through which it was suddenly possible to imagine the irruption of new things. In its most immediately material dimension, 15M was responsible for the development of practices of social unionism through the accelerated expansion of the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) ("Platform for People Affected by Mortgages"), the multiplication of neighbourhood assemblies (in parallel with the US movement Occupy) and the emergence of a new model of defence of public services: the Mareas (tides or waves of protest). The approach of movements such as the Marea Verde (against cuts in education) or Marea Blanca (against cuts and privatization in the health service) supposed an expansion of the trade union bases and a radical turn in the way of facing the struggle for the public, managing to break with the logic of confrontation between workers and consumers at the level of politics and communication.

Something that has been said a lot is that Podemos was the logical continuation of 15M. This is not true (it was just one of many possible continuations), but we are clear that without 15M there would have been no Podemos. On the other hand, it is not true that Podemos was an operation from above designed with its back to the movement and/or with the intention of cancelling it. Attempts to unify the struggles and give them political coherence had been going on for some time. The Marches for Dignity, which tried to break with the movement's dispersal so as to agree on a minimum program (bread, work, shelter), are a good example. It was 2014 and the social illusion was beginning to consume itself. The maxim of movement for the sake of movement had led to a situation of general exhaustion. The LOMCE law reorganising education, the last great battle of the Marea Verde, had been approved a year earlier. Many people began to look at the electoral rather than the social level as a viable terrain.

The institutional assault or the will to win

In 2013, the 15M movement and all ensuing struggles were in crisis. It was necessary to transform the relationship of forces existing at that time, lean on what was left of the social mobilization and take a step towards the electoral route. For the first time since the Transition, it seemed possible to promote a political force capable of pressing to open constituent processes that would make the ambition to "change everything" real. The international scene favoured this - in Greece, a plural and democratic Syriza, very different from the one that betrayed the OXI vote a few years later, led the parliamentary opposition and was on the verge of winning the elections. The hypothesis of the construction of a Europe of the peoples and the establishment of alliances between the countries of the south and the Mediterranean arch against the impositions of the Troika seemed feasible. But for this we needed to have our own Spanish Syriza. Thus, for many sectors, an oscillation of the pendulum was produced: the stage of social illusion was closing and that of the electoral illusion was opened.

Podemos was born from an agreement between some people from the Complutense University of

Madrid and Izquierda Anticapitalista (now Anticapitalistas). While the first sector provided visible faces recognized in left-wing activism, the second provided the necessary initial network of militants to promote territorial organization throughout the state. Accustomed to working in a small organization with a revolutionary conscience, very implanted in the movements but with little experience in communication or negotiation within large organizations (and for sure, naive and not very cautious in the relationship without then allies), we soon went into slipstream at key moments in the construction process and lost influence as the project progressed.

The initial objective of Podemos was to launch an anti-neoliberal political force, as broad, plural and open as would be possible, which would overcome the blockade of the traditional party apparatuses and serve to conquer political power with a program of rupture and transformation, based on the initial Manifesto, *Mover ficha* [1]. A good part of social activism looked at the birth of Podemos with suspicion, but it was the traditional left organizations who reacted worst: they saw it directly as an enemy which wanted to eat up an electoral space that they no longer aspired to transcend and that they considered their own. In 2014, Podemos stormed the European elections with a result expected by no one: five MEPs. After this success, the massive incorporation of new people began amid an avalanche of transfers of activists who left their previous organizations.

Along with Andalusia, Aragón was the exception within Podemos. We managed not only to stop the imposition of the Iglesias-Errejón tandem, but to have public debates of direct confrontation with the PSOE, as well as to give space in the organization to other currents and to establish alliances with similar processes that were emerging, such as Alto Aragón en Común. Pablo Echenique had no previous political experience, but he knew how to speak for the demands of the circles and surround himself with a team of committed people, coming from the struggles, and who firmly believed in what they did and said. Together with Teresa Rodríguez, he had the courage to publicly confront Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón and demonstrate that a different Podemos was possible: broader, open, democratic and rooted in the territory, with strong programmatic proposals and without falling into the trap of subordination to the PSOE. And yet, his incorporation into the state apparatus was enough to dismantle him as a critical voice and nullify the political force of Podemos Aragón.

End of cycle

The entry of Podemos and Unidas Podemos into governments led by the PSOE, both at the state level and in Aragon, represents a closing of the cycle. Unidas Podemos acceded to government at the point at which the Syriza referendum for the OXI in Greece and the capitulation of Tsipras ended: accepting a political defeat against the impositions of the Troika and renouncing ruptura with the 1978 regime. It went from “Yes, we can”, and the idea of reaching government as a tool to transform society, to co-government with the PSOE as an end in itself, disregarding the possibility of avoiding right-wing governments with support for investiture and programmatic negotiations from outside the social-liberal governments.

Unidas Podemos is located in the discourse of “No we can’t”: they have now discovered that being in government is not having power and they have systematically failed to fulfil promises such as the repeal of the labour reform and the gag law, the regulation of rents, freezing electricity prices, tax reform and so on. And what is worse, they try to counteract their impotence with a campaign of triumphalist propaganda and the dissemination of false news that makes them lose all current and future credibility.

Podemos has a future as a political party and will even manage to govern on more occasions.

But it has been fully amortized as a tool for real change. Having initially been a lever to challenge

the regime, today it has become a useful and necessary transformation project for propping up and systemic restoration. In this new role, the need to eliminate from within the few sectors that still maintain a horizon of democratic rupture explains what happened in Adelante Andalucía, where 11 Anticapitalistas deputies were expelled from the parliamentary group in breach of all the regulations in this regard, taking advantage of Teresa Rodríguez's maternity leave.

In this sense, it is paradoxical how the IU-PCE comrades have squared the circle: from distrust or more or less direct attack on new forms of political expression and their subsequent electoral manifestation, to the establishment of stable alliances as a way, not for the construction of a broad front opposed to social-liberalism, but for entry into their governments.

The most worrying thing about the drift in recent years is not the feeling of throwing away a good opportunity for the transforming left. The great danger lies in the fact that Unidas Podemos, being within the governments of the PSOE, cannot be part of the solution to the economic and social crisis that we are experiencing, but rather stands as part of the problem. Without strong references from the left facing the neoliberal-progressive management of the crisis, the ground is paved for the far right to present itself as the only possible alternative.

Because of all this, and after more than a year of internal debates in Anticapitalistas, in 2020 we made the decision to leave Podemos [2]. A full stop that ratified what was already a reality and that confirmed the defeat of our project for Podemos. We do not go back to the beginning, however: we always start again in the middle. We came out of this stage loaded with experience to better face the next cycle and having come into contact with new generations of activists and militants. We are convinced that our bet was the correct one and that the hypothesis of construction of popular power from broad, democratic organizations well demarcated from social-liberalism is still valid.

Start in the middle

The crisis of regime revealed by 15M is still open today, although with a fierce struggle between attempts to broaden it (the question of the corrupt monarchy, the right to decide in Catalonia, increasingly common conflicts and revolts) and restoration operations. Social unrest is expressed in different ways from ten years ago, as indicated by isolated collective outbursts (Black Lives Matter, freedom for Pablo Hasél and so on). At the same time, the international authoritarian and ultra-neoliberal wave also has an effect in the Spanish state, with the growth of extreme right-wing political options and presence in the streets. The pandemic has deepened a social ebb that was already underway, aggravated by a sense of disorientation on the left after the formation of co-governments with the PSOE. In this context, the main task is to combat political disaffection and the discourse that there is no alternative on two levels: building a credible left-wing voice with political autonomy, which is not subordinated to the neoliberal doctrine or self-relegated to marginality; and pushing the emergence and consolidation of centres of popular power starting from the struggles.

For this to be possible several things are necessary. The first, an expansion of the trade union bases to incorporate all the sectors that have been self-organizing for some time outside the bureaucratic and corroded practices of majority unionism: riders, domestic workers and so on. The second, to put at the centre of the processes of political rearticulation the impressive experience of collective self-defence and the construction of a class subject that the movement for the right to housing is taking on, mainly in Catalonia. The third, to establish relations of active solidarity with all the processes of challenge that can avoid the consolidation of a repressive, neoliberal and authoritarian outcome, however discursively progressive, to the crisis of the regime.

2021 is not 2011, but the hypothesis of the construction of broad anti-neoliberal spaces, in rupture

with the 1978 regime, pluralist and democratic, is still valid. The withdrawal into small, self-referential groups isolated from the social majorities is not an option and would not indicate more than their own impotence and zero political influence. To continue as if it were 2014, reproducing epic and triumphalist speeches about a context and a Podemos that no longer exists, is not valid either. A complex stage is opening in which the conjunctures will be increasingly variable and mutable. Our priority must be to nourish the conflicts that arise and build a framework capable of avoiding the emptying of the streets. Combining a capacity for response but also initiative, working to unify the struggles of different sectors and advancing towards the articulation of a transformative political project with unitary and class ambition.

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P.S.

• Fourth International. Tuesday 22 June 2021:
<https://fourth.international/en/europe/344>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 54845), [Spanish State: Podemos Manifesto – Turning outrage into political change](#).

[2] ESSF (article 53296), [Statement \(Spanish State\): “We decided to leave Podemos”](#).