

The European Challenge - Podemos short history

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For all of its success, Podemos has refused to deal seriously with the European Union and what it would take to truly transform Spain.

In Spain, the popular challenge to austerity that began with the indignados movement — commonly abbreviated as 15-M, for May 15, the day the protests began in 2011 — has contributed to the rise of new political formations with broad support. Podemos, a party that emerged from 15-M, is now a major player in national politics.

In December 2015, the Spanish general election failed to produce a majority for the first time since the end of Franco's dictatorship in 1977 — Podemos won about 20 percent of the vote, coming in just behind the center-right Popular Party (PP) and the center-left Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). Because Podemos refused to align with PSOE, no coalition could be formed, triggering a second round of voting.

Before the second set of ballots was cast in June 2016, Podemos entered into an alliance with United Left, a smaller party with roots in the historic parties of the Spanish left.

But this new coalition, dubbed Unidos Podemos, failed to mobilize its base, and the PP emerged from the second election victorious. Josep Maria Antentas spoke with George Souvlis for Jacobin, discussing his roots in the 15-M movement, Podemos's troubling trajectory since 2014, and the open question of Catalan independence.

George Souvlis: By way of introduction, what experiences have strongly influenced you, politically and academically?

Josep Maria Antentas: I belong to a generation that was politically shaped in the 1990s, in a context marked by the historic defeat in which the “short twentieth century” ended. These were bright times for neoliberalism. The hegemony of what Ignacio Ramonet labeled the *pensée unique* was overwhelming.

In the middle of the decade, the first major challenges to neoliberalism emerged, such as the Zapatista uprising in January 1994 or the French strikes of November-December 1995. But it was not until the end of the millennium that we entered a new phase — thanks to the blooming of the global justice movement after the World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle in November 1999.

I actively took part in this new movement — which during its brief existence changed the international political climate and showed that history had by no means ended.

During the first decades of the 2000s, I participated in building what became Anticapitalistas, an organization that went on to participate in the formation of Podemos. We formed Anticapitalistas because we felt that that, in addition to taking part in social struggles, we also needed to build a real political alternative, which we imagined as a product of the plural gathering between different organizations and individuals.

It was a strategic wager — and one opposed by the majority of social activists, who held a “movementist” strategy. Our hypothesis was not to build a political tool that could become majority in society — this would come with the crisis — but one that could have a significant audience and influence.

Intellectually, in the 1990s and 2000s I was engrossed in studying the globalization process and resistance movements. I was interested also in the strategic debates that emerged inside the global justice movement, as well as those concerning the “Bolivarian” experiences in Latin America and those between the European left parties.

The most decisive intellectual influence to me was Daniel Bensaïd, who combined the revolutionary tradition of the workers movement with a range of diverse theoretical explorations.

After the crisis in 2008, and all that came after, I have been particularly interested in coming back again to the œuvre of two authors that I always liked — Walter Benjamin and Antonio Gramsci, who are useful when thinking about the contemporary world.

Tell me about the origins of the 15-M movement and its effect on Spanish politics. How did the movement influence the rise of Podemos?

The 15-M movement was a turning point in the Spanish political and social trajectory.

Even though 15-M soon dispersed and ceased to exist as an articulated social movement, it transformed into myriad initiatives that together constitute a sort of “15-M galaxy” that draws inspiration from the movement.

The *indignados* rebellion put the financial and political elite at the center of its critique — and adopted “democracy” as its banner, but with the meaningful adjective of “real.” It expressed a reaction against the subjugation of the whole of society to the interest of a tiny financial minority — with the crumbling middle class playing an important role.

The movement’s emblematic figure was the young person, especially the graduated youth whose professional prospects were blocked and whose only trajectory appeared to be downwards. But the movement went beyond this base of middle-class youth, also reaching working-class neighborhoods and becoming more diverse in terms of generational and class composition.

The movement emerged outside the traditional militant milieu, in a context of real helplessness on the Left, to successfully confront the financial dictatorship.

15-M not only opposed the political system and financial powers, but also a left that had either been an accomplice to the neoliberal project or proven unable to successfully fight it.

At the same time, 15-M deployed itself on the basis of the values historically associated with the Left — values that have nevertheless been in permanent tension and sometimes contradiction with the

very practice of the Left itself.

In this sense, the “15-M event” modified the terms of the political debate and the political landscape by putting the elites on the defensive. The passivity, apathy, and resignation that until then were overwhelming gave way to a period of greater politicization, although this politicization was partial and contradictory. In other words, 15-M helped to modify the hegemonic “common sense” (in the Gramscian sense of the term).

15-M put some unsolved strategic questions on the table, to which the movement itself had no answers, and that actually went beyond what the movement could have offered.

The birth of Podemos in January 2014 marked a significant strategic shift — a leap towards electoral activity.

A real paradigm change gradually took place between 2012 and 2014, thanks to three factors: the worsening of the financial crisis in summer 2012 because of the Bankia bankruptcy and the bailout to the banking system; the rise of Syriza in the elections of May and June 2012; and the verification of the limits of social resistance.

The strategic hypotheses prevalent in the 1990s and the 2000s — changing the world without taking the power, creating free spaces, engaging in social activism while ignoring party and electoral politics, engaging in NGO institutional lobbying — simply got suddenly old.

These strategies proved insufficient to providing an answer to the political crisis. Step by step, the idea that it was also necessary to participate in the electoral arena began to gain strength, albeit still in a vague way.

It is necessary to point out that Podemos is not the party of 15-M and has never claimed to be. It is neither an organic emanation of the movement nor an inevitable consequence of it.

Rather, it is the product of the specific political choices of a certain group of people — Anticapitalistas (then named “Izquierda Anticapitalista,” or Anticapitalist Left) and a bunch of activists around Pablo Iglesias, strongly influenced by “Bolivarian” Latin American experiences.

Both had the sense to propose something besides dealing with the crisis in a routine way, as if it was business as usual, and recognized the crisis as a potentially vital moment of rupture.

Nevertheless, without 15-M Podemos would have not existed. It was 15-M and the struggles against austerity that came in 2012 and 2013 that created the conditions for the development of a project like Podemos — an initiative that, anyway, would have not existed without the strategic good move of its founders.

The independence movement in Catalonia has posed a challenge for Podemos. What’s at stake in the debate over the so-called “national question,” both inside and outside the party?

The multinational nature of the Spanish state and the rise of the Catalan independence process have together constituted one of the major challenges to Podemos’ populist project.

The party has been forced to reconcile its popular nationalist discourse with its recognition of the multinational reality of the Spanish state — a recognition that, by the way, has never been so well defined by a mainstream political party, symbolically or explicitly, as it is by Podemos.

But Podemos has made several zig-zags concerning the specific question of Catalan independence.

Before the European elections of May 2014, it defended a referendum on independence in Catalonia that was fiercely opposed by the Spanish government and other powerful sectors of Spanish society.

But after its success in those elections, Podemos began to dissolve its defense of the Catalan referendum, entering an erratic phase with multiple changes of position and increasing ambiguity in its platform. This ended in an electoral fiasco in the Catalan elections of September 27, 2015.

Afterwards, there was a new turn and Podemos participated in the building of a broad, plural coalition in Catalonia — En Comú Podem, led by Ada Colau, the current mayor of Barcelona and former spokesperson of the anti-evictions movement. This implied that Podemos had once again embraced the Catalan independence referendum.

Beyond the national question, Podemos's decision to adopt a "patriotic" discourse has presented another difficulty. Spanish national symbols (including the flag and the very notion of patria, or homeland) have been the currency of the Right since at least the Spanish Civil War. As a result, Podemos's attempts to re-signify the concept of patria to evoke a democratic and multinational vision have appeared quite artificial.

What is the party's position regarding the national debt? Spain recorded a government debt of 99.2 percent of the country's GDP in 2015, and this debt reached an all time high of 99.3 percent in 2014.

First of all, Podemos has developed a conception of politics in which the specific political program is very secondary to the electoral effort.

In fact, in each of the elections in which Podemos has taken part (elections to the European Parliament in May 2014, the regional elections in May 2015, and the legislative elections in December 2015 and June 2016) its program has consistently changed in favor of a more moderate approach that dropped any proposal that could seem too "radical."

Podemos avoided adopting public and firm programmatic commitments, and did not make any effort to describe its project in specific terms — much less articulate what an anti-austerity government might look like. Nor has it worked to popularize mass demands that could serve as levers for mobilization and political combat.

Podemos's program has been both quite invisible and liquid, to use Bauman's famous expression. At the same time, over the last two years Podemos's leaders have repeatedly presented contradictory proposals.

This is the context you need to consider if you want to understand Podemos' position concerning the debt.

At the beginning Podemos defended a citizen's audit, but later this was watered down in favor of debt renegotiation and restructuring. Since then, Podemos has not offered much in the way of a coherent position on the debt issue.

For example, when the European Commission announced that the new Spanish government would have to make steep cuts to public expenditures shortly before the July 26 elections, Iglesias didn't explicitly come out against the logic of cuts. Instead, he simply emphasized that the required deficit reduction could be made without touching basic public services if the state got more money from a better tax system.

Podemos emerged from a protest movement associated with a horizontalist ideology not found in the traditional left-wing parties. Did the institutionalization of the movement in Podemos stifle this tradition by limiting the room for opposition within the party?

The founding group of Podemos included two projects. One, represented by Anticapitalistas, advocated a “movement-party” that could work in harmony with the legacy and the culture of 15-M, based on internal democracy and participation in the spirit of rupture.

But the tendency that prevailed was the project of “populist” inspiration around Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón, in which internal democracy and rank-and-file participation played no role, and which was only centered towards short-term electoral victory.

This party model was officially confirmed by Podemos’s founding congress in Vistalegre in October 2014. There it set up what Errejón dubbed an “electoral war machine,” closing down any attempt of organizational experimentation.

Podemos was shaped as a party centered only in electoral competition and political communication. It completely neglected the work of rooting the party in unions, community organizations, and social movements.

This electoral war machine had a highly hierarchic and centralized structure that created weak local and regional leaderships — regional leaders were often promoted on the basis of their loyalty to the party’s central leadership, to which they remained politically and materially dependent.

Internal decision-making bodies were elected by non-proportional methods in order to exclude minorities. As a result, internal bodies became the expression of the dominant faction in each place and not plural bodies of political synthesis.

In this scheme, local branches (called *círculos*) played no role and had no function beyond organizing electoral campaigns. They never became places for real political debate, nor were they places to plan everyday political work.

The result has been an organization with a strong central political and communication team, superimposed on a very fragile structure. Internal crises in local and regional bodies are recurrent, there are precious few political cadres, and the party is poorly embedded in social life outside of its capacity for mass communication.

Any party organized in such a short period of time and experiencing such huge electoral success would have had all these kinds of problems, but the party model adopted by Podemos helped to amplify them.

Following Iglesias’s decision to replace the secretary of the organization in March, there have been some concrete improvements and a better working climate has been created. But the party model must be entirely changed.

How do you explain Podemos’s poor showing in the recent elections, when the party lost a million votes compared to the previous round of voting?

From a large historical perspective, Unidos Podemos — the alliance between Podemos and the smaller United Left party — was a success. In fact, it demonstrated the profound transformation of the traditional party system in the Spanish state — never has a political force such as Unidos Podemos had so much electoral support.

Nevertheless, from a short-term perspective, the results were below what was possible and what was expected. The alliance missed its chance to deliver a definitive blow to bipartisanship in Spain.

Between the first round of voting in December of 2015 and the second round in June, Podemos issued too many contradictory messages.

Repeatedly, voters have seen Podemos say one thing and do the opposite: rejecting left unity and then making an alliance with United Left; saying they would never form a joint government with PSOE only to then make an offer to do just that; refusing the label “left” and then embracing the label of “social democracy.”

The cumulative effect of these contradictory messages is to not only disorient the party’s social base, but to also give the impression that Podemos is fickle force that adapts its politics depending on the moment. This has torpedoed its credibility.

To make matters worse, Podemos mounted a very mild and feeble campaign, designed more to appeal to moderate voters than to mobilize Podemos’s own social base. Podemos has traditionally been a daring force in the electoral field. But this time the party designed a conservative campaign aimed to not take any risks.

It didn’t pay off. Unidos Podemos lost one million votes compared to what Podemos and Izquierda Unida obtained separately in the first round of voting in December. Most of those votes were lost to abstention, not to other parties. Clearly, Unidos Podemos failed to sufficiently mobilize its electoral base for the second round of voting.

Since June, Errejón has said that it is necessary for Podemos to move beyond the electoral war machine and develop a “popular movement.” But he understands a “popular movement” in cultural terms — as a strategy aimed to win long-term cultural hegemony, and as a parallel complement to electoral work. Again, social struggle, not to mention self-organization, is missing.

For his part, Iglesias has expressed the idea that after the June elections Podemos should move from being a “partisan army” to a “regular army.” It is not clear what concrete political consequences may follow from this, and it is likely that Podemos will swerve and shift suddenly as has done since its formation.

But there seems to be a general desire on the part of the Podemos’s leadership to further moderate the party’s positions in order to increase its governmental and institutional credibility, especially among those potential voters still suspicious of Podemos.

I believe that the party should actually take another direction. Podemos must permanently distinguish itself as a different kind of party — a party that does things differently, that says what others won’t, that has as coherent practice and discourse.

It is not about being trapped in a classic debate between being a governmental force or an opposition force, but to discuss what type of credibility it is required and how it can be obtained. The traditional political parties are not especially credible, and so acting like them won’t help Podemos advance in this field.

What effect has the experience of Syriza in Greece had on Podemos?

The Tsipras government did the opposite of what was necessary. It capitulated fast and almost without struggle. It had to face real difficulties, with hugely powerful forces arrayed against it. But Tsipras refused to be daring, to actually try to live up to the party’s radical promise.

He never had a Plan B, beyond trying to square the circle, and without Plan B there is no Plan A. Now, he has become a caricature of himself. In less than one year he buried the hopes for change, folded to financial powers, and stabbed his supporters in the back.

History has shown that in many cases the gravediggers of the future can come from the ranks of the people's camp. When this happens, consequences are devastating. Disorientation and confusion expand without control and it takes time to recover. This is precisely what the troika was looking for.

Podemos made a big mistake in offering its support to Tsipras, and so it found itself without arguments when political adversaries pointed at the Syriza example and said "See? It is not possible to rule in a different way."

The Greek situation was not easy for Podemos. To admit that Syriza capitulated is not nice, but to pretend that nothing happened and that all is going well is even worse.

Podemos should have tried to send two strategic messages about Greece. First, change is possible but complex, so it is not enough to vote for an anti-austerity party — it is also necessary to mobilize and organize.

Second, Podemos has an unbreakable commitment to the interests of the majority of the Spanish people, and so will not hesitate to distance itself from friendly forces such as Syriza if they take a wrong path.

Maybe this approach to the Greek situation wouldn't have won Podemos as many voters. But at least it would have better positioned the party for the mid- and long term battle.

In reality, there has not been a serious debate about what happened in Greece in any of the relevant organizations of the Spanish left — including Podemos, United Left, or the local candidacies that won the local elections of May 24, 2014 in Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza, A Coruña and other cities.

Why has this opportunity been missed? First, the lack of a practical and concrete internationalism in the everyday practice of the main organizations of the Spanish left, whose leaderships are not projected towards what's going on in other European countries.

Second, the focus on domestic tasks hampers their ability to address non-immediate issues. The intensity of the Spanish political crisis and the concatenation of elections ensures that the urgent always prevails over the necessary.

Third, people within Podemos have been reluctant to see the Greek reality as it is, because in a certain sense it projects some shadows on their own project inside the Spanish state.

This self-deception takes three forms: denying the gravity of what Tsipras has done; considering his pro-memorandum turn a temporary deviation, and hoping that when the balance of forces are more favorable Syriza will take an anti-austerity turn; and thinking that in the Spanish context things will be different because Spain has a more powerful state than Greece, so a left government will be able to negotiate in better terms with the European Union.

Why do so many people continue to vote for a party as corrupt and discredited as the Popular Party (PP), which won the recent elections?

PP managed to use the specter of a possible Unidos Podemos victory to mobilize the conservative vote and to concentrate it around PP — to the detriment of Ciudadanos, a new neoliberal party promoted artificially by the media as a replacement for the traditional right-wing parties.

To this we have to add the effect of Brexit. The Brexit referendum occurred precisely in the final decisive stage of the electoral campaign, and it was presented in an apocalyptic manner by the media.

This helped to foster a climate of fear that led many voters to support PP because of their supposed commitment to maintaining Spain's EU membership.

In addition to all this, when analyzing the electoral strength of PP it is important not to forget the generational factor. Most PP voters are people of advanced age. This is not a problem for PP in the short term — after all, they operate in a country with high abstention rates among young people. But in the long run, the lack of contact with new generations is a problem for any political party.

What is your take on the recent developments in the United Kingdom and with Brexit? Could a left-wing nationalism be a progressive solution today?

The referendum shows several contradictions and paradoxes. Brexit is a blow to British financial capital as well as to other ruling classes in Europe, whose continental integration project is now confronted with a new crisis.

At the same time, the Leave campaign was dominated by reactionary and xenophobic forces that have been emboldened by their victory and will now be able to set the internal British political agenda in the short term.

However, the referendum may also reignite the independence process in Scotland, which could contribute to the weakening of the British state in the future.

The British left was off balance, forced to either campaign for Lexit (but without a real chance of silencing the reactionary Leave campaign), or to campaign for Remain while at the same time criticizing official Europeanism and the European Union.

The European left, particularly the Euro-Mediterranean left, has to seriously deal with the European question.

We must develop a systematic critique of the whole EU project, but on an internationalist basis that openly confronts the xenophobic right, without any nostalgia for the Keynesian national-state.

The Greek lesson is clear: breaking with the EU framework is crucial for any anti-austerity government. The proposals to reform the European Union or to negotiate a more flexible agenda with European authorities are a strategic dead-end.

The Left needs to push forward an alternative based on sovereignty from below and international solidarity — not cling to the futile hope for reform within the EU.

In the Spanish case, most forces on the Left have insufficient proposals concerning the European Union and seem strategically disarmed. Podemos refused to deal with the EU question in a consistent way, instead dodging the issue.

Of all Podemos's programmatic limits, this is for me the most important and most urgent. If ever there is a government led by Podemos, this futile faith in an improbable compromise with the troika may push the government into a cul-de-sac not so different from the one Syriza encountered in Greece.

P.S.

* Jacobin. 8.22.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/podemos-european-union-syriza-catalan-independence/>

* Josep Maria Antentas is a professor of sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.
George Souvlis is a PhD candidate in history at the European University Institute, Florence.