

# Podemos and the ‘Democratic Revolution’ in Spain

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Image: Guanyem initiative in Barcelona. [Photo by [David Samaranch and Cristina Mañas](#).]

*Even if one almost always goes wrong with such prognoses, the fact is that the Spanish state is facing the biggest rupture since the end of the Franco dictatorship. In several large cities, the left radical-democratic lists of the Guanyem / Ganemos Initiatives have real chances of winning the mayoral elections in May. In recent months in Catalonia, millions were on the street calling for the democratic right to self-determination, to which Madrid could only answer with new prohibitions. But it is above all the left party [Podemos](#) (We Can) that is dominating Spain's political landscape. According to some current polls, Podemos, though founded only in January 2014, is the strongest party today with an almost 28 per cent voter approval, one year before the parliamentary elections.*

What is more remarkable about Podemos than the poll results, which can merely be volatile snapshots of the moment, is the social mobilization that the organization set in motion. 900 Podemos base groups, so called circles, have formed throughout the whole country. Almost 10,000 people took part in the party's [founding congress in October](#). And in municipal district assemblies hundreds of neighbours discuss the crisis, capitalism, and ‘real democracy’ – and in this case ‘neighbours’ means literally neighbours. Podemos has left the subcultural milieus behind.

The level of debate is astounding, determined as it is, on the one hand, by a pragmatism directed at the 2015 elections and, on the other, by sharp criticism of neoliberalism and bourgeois political routine.

## **Crisis of Representation**

Podemos is the expression of a crisis of representation that has gripped many countries with a neoliberal regime since the 1990s. That is, Podemos is not the product of a gradual process of growth but appears to have emerged out of a political vacuum and is expanding in an explosive manner. No existing political structures (such as trade unions, the larger NGOs or the media) have supported the project; the party activists – most of them under 35 – belong to the generation characterized as apolitical, and its immense popularity among the population is not easily explained. In the Spanish mainstream, left positions were decidedly marginal until 2011.

Despite this, Podemos naturally did not come out of nowhere. Its bases are the new anti-institutional protest movements that have repeatedly filled public squares and streets in the Iberian peninsula. That Podemos is more than a fleeting protest party like the Pirates in Germany has mainly to do with the 15M Movement and the Mareas.

The [15M Movement](#) (public square occupations with the demand for 'real democracy now'), which many on the left at first regarded with suspicion and at the very least was seen to be naïve and tending to apoliticism, has brought forth a new generation of activists and new forms of politics and made possible a tremendous repoliticization – both internally and externally.

The crucial factor in the 15M Movement is its intuitive linking of criticism of capitalism with democratic demands. Starting with the concrete European experience, in which there is no longer a distinction between the economic and social policy of socialists and conservatives, the movement has problematized the systemic limits to democracy in the bourgeois state: i) The democratic process ends where the interests of big capital, that is especially the banks, begins. Before the outbreak of the crisis, Spain's debt ratio was 40 per cent under the German level. Only when Madrid was forced by the EU to bail out private Spanish banks (and thus also German investors), did the state deficit explode. The cuts in healthcare and social services already made by the PSOE governments showed that in an emergency government executives have the function of carrying out underlying power interests. ii) However, political parties also seem to be increasingly standing in the way of democracy. With the 'political class', distinguished by professional politics and closed decision-making circuits, a specific social group has emerged with its own strategies of power and self-enrichment. In Spain, the political apparatuses are strongly shaped by the real estate boom of recent decades. The awarding of building permits and construction contracts, as well as state oversight of public savings banks (which have flourished in conjunction with the construction industry) guaranteed the 'political class' lucrative (mostly illegal) sources of income.

In contrast to what media reports suggest, the 15M Movement has in no way dissolved itself after the ebbing of the 2011 street protests but has spread throughout society. Thus we have seen the emergence, among other things, of the so-called *mareas*, protest movement for the defence of the public education and healthcare systems, in which public service employees come together through patients' initiatives and patient and refugee groups, or the movement against forced evictions – the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH)*, a coalition of base groups, which connect direct action, solidarity and case-oriented self-help in a remarkable way. There is also a revival of labour organizations: In Andalusia, for example, activists of the base trade union SAT organized the non-violent redistribution of food purloined from supermarkets. The *mareas* in the healthcare and education sectors are supported by local groups of various smaller and larger trade unions. And, finally, the *Marchas de la Dignidad*, nationwide protest marches on Madrid, mobilized a million people in 2014 once again.

These movements made it clear that there is a social majority beyond the political apparatuses. But it also became clear – and this in turn led to thinking processes among the anti-institutional left – that the neoliberal regime has no difficulty in sitting out social protests (as Germany's red-green government did with the Hartz IV protest at the beginning of the 2000s). Since the use of force is no longer an option, as it was for the labour movement of the twentieth century, a central means of pressure in adversarial politics is missing. 'Citizens' protests', which duly request permits from the authorities and do not disturb capitalist business as usual, do not affect the neoliberal regime. It is not prohibited to have a different opinion because in the end it has no practical consequences.

## **Transforming Political Power**

Against this background, the social movements in Spain faced the question of how these constant mobilizations could be transformed into real power from below, into *poder popular*. The Podemos and Guanyem initiatives – and this distinguishes these phenomena from other organizations of the European left – aim not simply at the founding of a new party but at the redefinition of political space. What is at issue is thus not simply new parliamentary political majorities but a transformation of the institutional framework.

The danger of accommodation to the institutions (as in the case of the German Greens, who in the end transformed themselves more than they did politics) has up to now been held at bay through the sheer speed of the movement's growth. The anti-institutional resistance is permeating the institutions with such vehemence that the institutions cannot hedge and absorb the dissidence – at least this is the project's manifest hope.

In this Podemos can certainly be accused of being itself a result of 'alienated' politics. The comparison with the [Guanyem initiative in Barcelona](#) makes it clear what this means: The latter is committed – completely within the logic of grassroots movements – to local processes of change from below. Guanyem Barcelona, which will very likely present ex-squatter Ada Colau as a candidate for the mayoral elections there, arose from the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH). The declared goal of Guanyem is to set into motion a municipal grassroots movement via municipal district assemblies, which will work out a platform for an alternative city government. It is thus expressly not aiming at welding together left groups through negotiations to form a coalition but to circumvent the existing (fragmented) left and at the same time incorporate them through the emergence of a grassroots movement. In terms of method, a path is being consciously taken here which is an alternative to the extant forms of representation.

Podemos is proceeding completely differently in this respect and has had great success – although in so doing it is in conflict with the radical-democratic postulates of 15M: Podemos' founding group – Pablo Iglesias, Juan Carlos Monedero, Carolina Bescansa, Luís Alegre, and Íñigo Errejón – are Madrid political scientists, most of whom have worked for extended periods in Venezuela or in Bolivia. Its central figure is the 36-year-old Pablo Iglesias, who has made a name for himself on radio and television talk shows as a critic of the neoliberal regime.

The rise of Podemos thus does not completely conform to the grassroots criteria of the 15M Movement. The initiative is carried by a small group, which to be sure intends to subject itself to democratic contestation processes but at the same time has formulated a clear claim to leadership. And it is doubtless also a product of the mass media; without television Podemos would probably be a marginal phenomenon. The grassroots participatory process unfolding with Podemos was thus originally set in motion in a more vertical way.

Podemos' founding group is pursuing a strategy overtly based on Latin American experiences. The central objective is to transform the general social discontent into an alternative political hegemony and thus launch a mobilization that in turn will open up perspectives going beyond a classic reform policy. In this context we should remember that the political change in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia was neither the simple result of electoral victories nor the result of revolutions but emerged from the combination of radical rupture, continuity, and transformation. The anti-neoliberal revolts and mass uprising have blocked the neoliberal regime in these countries for almost a decade, but the regime change took place within the existing political system. The opening up of larger transformational

perspectives after this was in the last analysis due to the constitutional processes that gave form to the underlying constituent processes (the emergence of alternative popular power). These constitutional processes resulted from the fact that in these countries there was broad popular participation in the discussion of a new social contract. Podemos appears to be pursuing a similar project; it is formulating, at least implicitly, the problem of a democratic revolution that bursts the existing institutions.

## Two Elements of Discourse

To open up this possibility Podemos' discourse is based principally on two elements. 1. *Relative Indeterminacy*: Even if its critique of neoliberalism is unequivocal the consequences drawn from it are indefinite. Podemos' whole presence appears shaped by this ambivalence. Although its founding circle comes out of the Communist Youth, was active in the milieu of the [Izquierda Unida](#) (IU - United Left) or the more left Izquierda Anticapitalista, or positively refers to Chavism in Venezuela, Podemos tries to position itself outside of left-right schemes. Time and again, Podemos stresses that it represents 'the new', which cannot be described by concepts linked to 'the old'. Accordingly, social conflicts are not dealt with as class questions but as a conflict between *los de abajo*, those 'at the bottom' (to which then the ominous 'middle strata' explicitly belong, which are becoming increasingly scarce in Spain), and the 'political caste'. All problems which could damage the 'Podemos brand' - in the marketing newspeak that the founders themselves use in describing the party - are dealt with in a similarly ambiguous way. For example, Iglesias positively approaches the concept of patriotism, a concept heavily tainted in Spain, and re-signifies it: "Being a patriot means extending the democratic right to self-determination to all spheres and defending the public services." At the same time, however, he defends the right of Catalans and the Basque to decide whether they want to belong to Spain, even though he regards independence as not a sensible solution.

2. *Momentum*: Podemos assumes that the weakness of left politics is not due to faulty analysis but to the lack of a promising counter-project, and as a consequence is committed to targeted political mobilization. The entire political energy is to be concentrated on overthrowing the two-party system, that is, 'the caste', in the 2015 elections. This purpose is expressed with a conviction that at times sounds bizarre - now the party is even striving for an absolute majority 'because there is no alternative to it'.

Against this background it becomes clear why it does not make sense to accuse Podemos of the ambiguity we have described. Podemos has kept its discourse open in a completely conscious way. They are openly building here on the experiences of the constituent processes in Latin America. In the 1990s and 2000s, Latin America's neo-left, especially Venezuelan Chavism, developed discourse figures capable of achieving hegemony (without working through them on the level of theory), which Ernesto Laclau later called "[empty signifiers](#)." Laclau claims that hegemonic politics necessarily implies vagueness because social relations are heterogeneous and projects capable of majority support must accordingly reflect this heterogeneity through ambiguity. Moreover, the relative indeterminacy of a project opens up, to 'the many', participatory and democratic space for shaping reality. In the end, a social transformation is only truly open if the result is not predetermined at the outset. Podemos seems to have internalized these considerations. The project's main objective is to open a political space to the social majorities excluded from the real decision-making processes. Just as Chavism, which first attacked the corrupt 'Fourth Republic' as enemies and then the 'escuálidos', that is, the U.S.-oriented elites, Podemos has similarly chosen a clearly defined, rhetorically easy to handle opponent that unites the

heterogeneous popular camp through exclusion: 'the caste'.

The dangers of this radical political experiment are obvious. That the indeterminacy of the project has up to now not found expression in turf wars is also due to the fact that all efforts are being concentrated on overthrowing the two-party system. As soon as this goal is achieved or setbacks are suffered along the way, this openness can lead to a crisis at any moment. At least Podemos' base is more heterogeneous than that of Germany's Pirates: The European Parliament deputy Pablo Echenique, who proposed an alternative, more collective organizational structure at Podemos' founding congress, recently admitted, with admirable self-criticism, that just a few years ago he had been a supporter of the neoliberal party Ciudadanos and had been in favour of the Iraq War. Other Podemos components had been apolitical, internet activists or were active in the Communist Youth.

The danger is also very real that the founding group will become an elitist leadership circle. The new organizational statute, which was discussed in October in the Asamblea de Ciudadanos and then approved in a rank-and-file decision, strongly reduces the party's structure to the leader, Pablo Iglesias. The alternative draft, "Sumando Podemos," submitted by the European Parliament deputies Pablo Echenique and Teresa Rodríguez, proposed a three-person collective leadership. It makes sense that the overwhelming majority were for Iglesias' concept; precisely because Podemos is so heterogeneous the organization needs a strong symbolic identity. Furthermore, in recent years Iglesias has acted coherently and with ethical integrity – and he is therefore capable of integrating diverse currents.

On the other hand, in the process a personalistic leadership structure is being established, which – as can be observed in the last decade in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador – can, it is true, facilitate social mobilization but which then at its core contradicts longer-term democratization processes. Very strong leadership figures foster a culture of opportunism and claqueurs.

### **Long-term Transformation Project?**

But the central question is a different one: Does Podemos actually have a transformation project that goes beyond the removal of the [Partido Popular](#) (PP) government? I think it does. For what would have to be done has been obvious after the mobilizations since 2011 and the ongoing conflicts with the other nations in the Spanish state:

1. The notorious corruption has to be fought, for example by establishing mechanisms of the social control of public projects and administration, introducing salary limits for functionaries, and legally anchoring radical democratic forms of participation.
2. The privatization of basic social services and the policy of forced evictions have to be stopped. No economic logic can justify the socialization of speculative losses and their being shifted onto the shoulders of the population.
3. The repressive policy against social and independence movements has to be ended and the anti-democratic exceptional laws annulled.
4. But most of all Spain needs a constitutional process similar to the process in Latin America. The 1978 constitution is (as is the monarchy established at the time) the result of an elite pact of Francoist, regionalist, social democratic and Eurocommunist party leaderships and thus the expression of a fundamental democratic deficit. It is true that this constitutional pact made possible an

opening in Spain after forty years of dictatorship, but it impeded a real break with the power of Francoist elites in the state and economy. A constituent process – that is, not just a meeting of constitutional jurists and politicians but a fundamental social debate as the form of development of a new popular hegemony – could finally bring to a close the unfinished democratization process. In this the *derecho a decidir* (the right to decide), defended by both social as well as independence movements, could be given a key role as an instrument for the re-democratization of *all* social spheres.

Finally, there is the question of why IU ([Izquierda Unida](#) – the United Left) was not able to articulate these wishes for change, although it shares many of Podemos' demands and in some cases formulates them more clearly. The answer seems obvious to me: IU could not articulate the revolt against the political system because it itself was an integral part of this system in many respects. The Communist Party (CP) – as the most important party of IU – actively backed the 1978 constitutional pact and also participated, via the trade union Comisiones Obreras, in the social partnership, established by the PSOE, with all its corporatist practices. IU, as a broad electoral alliance, has repeatedly formed coalition governments with the PSOE and in so doing also reproduced the usual corrupt practices. It participated – as, for example, in the case of the [Caja Madrid](#) savings bank – in the plundering of public financial institutions.

But even apart from the question of individual cases of corruption IU's organizational structures stand in contradiction to the radical democratic ambitions emerging from society. The political practice of the CP and IU was always marked by the classical logic of representation in which priority is given to the strengthening of one's own organization and its electoral successes over social (self-empowerment) processes. The means to this change – the political organization – has become an end in itself, so that IU, like almost all parties belonging to the Party of the European Left, has become a self-referential electoral alliance. Even if thousands of party members are active in movements, the institutional logic dominates. Radical attempts at reorganization come too late.

Podemos has – up to now – been different: The organization is presently the instrument of a social process that is progressing too rapidly for the party to turn around the relation between the democratic revolt and the institutional form.

This of course does not mean that everything that happened in IU or was done by it in the last thirty years was wrong. Podemos will probably soon be confronted by many of the problems that characterize IU today. For example, how can a balance be found between the emerging political tendencies without internal organizational considerations determining the politics of the organization. But this is probably the central insight of the political process in Spain today: The intervention of the organized left was not at all irrelevant; without the experience of left activists, the 15M Movement would have fallen apart sooner, the PAH never have emerged, and Podemos would probably have been a diffuse liberal internet party like Germany's Pirates. However, a social process is sweeping aside even the organizational forms of the left. The revolutionary-democratic awakening, longed for by a part of Spanish society, cannot be articulated through the bureaucratic corset of the IU. How long Podemos remains the appropriate space for this is to be seen. However, today Podemos is one of the spaces of the democratic revolution in Spain and probably the most important one. •

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