

# Understanding Transversality: Spain's Podemos

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Region: [Europe](#)

Global Research, August 09, 2016

*When the 15-M movement broke out onto the streets across Spain in 2011, it didn't coalesce into a series of political parties on either end of the political spectrum. In fact, there was a common declaration that stood out among all of the indignados: "They don't represent us". This referred to the "Regime of '78" and the dominant political actors that have been ruling Spain since the death of Franco, and have made the rupturing of the social contract possible over the last 30 years.*



Juan Antonio Gil de los Santos, Podemos MP

The 15-M movement saw people come together from diverse places, not just ideologically, but in terms of their perspectives and their understanding of reality. Yet if there was something that truly united them it was their common diagnosis of the current situation, namely an unsustainable disequilibrium between the establishment (an elite armed with political and economic power, ready to do anything to keep their position), and the outsiders (ordinary people that don't participate in the decision making process), the widening gap between these two groups, and the forcing of the latter into an increasingly precarious position.

The establishment makes use of its power and its vast resources, they have ossified the institutions that were supposed to protect the rights of the outsiders, they have become increasingly out of touch with reality, and over time have completely broken the fragile balance created by the Constitution of '78, which brought democracy and social rights to the Spanish people after 40 years of dictatorship. The 1978 Constitution guaranteed – among other things – the right to decent housing, the right to healthcare, and the right to work. These promises have been greatly compromised by austerity, with major cuts to education and healthcare, labor reforms that increase the precariousness of the workers, and foreclosures that have left families homeless across the country.

Pushed to the limit, and having discovered the establishment's deception, popular movements took to the streets to get rid of those who put their own interests above the

social majority.

They did this in an organized manner, without partisan support, going beyond the outdated left-right axis. The *indignados*, as opposed to those unaffected elites who refused to resign, stood for social justice, freedom, democracy and the common good, and demanded greater democracy in the economy. They demanded that the political class be empathetic to this view and to stop being the institutional continuation of the IBEX35 (the 35 most powerful businesses in Spain).

Time passed, general elections were held, the Troika and austerity continued, misery grew and spread, but the 15-M movement never disappeared. It matured, incubating within it a solution which it wasn't going to find outside.

"Start a party and run in the elections", someone said to those people in the streets with their assemblies and proposals, shared by an immense majority of society. Soon he would wish he had bitten his tongue.

This is how Podemos began, as the inheritor of the 15-M movement. Though it would be unjust not to mention the many years of struggle for common welfare and for more just social models, in the form of organizations or activists from parties that share our goals. In the first stage, many people came together in the same space - both veteran activists as well as those who hadn't engaged in politics until then - some already organized and some yet to organize.

The double challenge then began: that of channeling popular power into a shared line of action and that of organizing a party as a sum of parts, but harmonized by diverse collectives. Podemos has transitioned from movement to party, with the objective of entering institutions, to transform them, to put them on the side of the people.

After the success in the 2014 EU Parliamentary elections, where Podemos won five seats, the party-movement attracted more people, who began to identify for the first time with a project that aimed at bringing down the barriers of outmoded politics, and recovering the hope of achieving its desired aims. Many people who abstained from voting in past elections became activists in the 15-M movement. The moment arrived when political organization opened the door to a series of electoral opportunities, which will prove to be crucial for the future of Spain.

Through assembly debates in local "circles" they discussed the political and organizational models with which they would face these different elections. In October 2014 the proposals with the most votes were discussed in the founding congress of Podemos in Vistalegre. Podemos was founded upon a transversal political model - meaning that it is committed to building a broad consensus among diverse groups of people for things like the defense of free, public and universal healthcare, the social right to housing, and regaining lost labour rights.

But what exactly do we mean by "a transversal political model"? Transversality can be understood as the act of building majorities. Not electoral majorities per se, but social majorities made up of identities based on common goals; building inclusive identities adapted to today's society. An example is that of the identity of "working class", which was a necessary identity when they were organizing to overcome their class conditions 50 years ago, but which is not appropriate to the modern world.

It is in this transversality that there is a clear reflection of citizens that came together in the streets in 15-M. It is this important subject which I would like to focus upon in this article. Because it is thanks to this transversality – this broad appeal – that we have been successful. It has resulted in governments having changed in cities such as Cadiz, Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia. Transversality has made it possible to take projects anchored in minority objectives and integrate them into major projects with real possibilities of reaching the government, and transforming institutions from within, the essential element to successfully carry out the projects.

Of course commonly identified goals and lines of action by the social majority is not sufficient. They must be ready to take institutions back from the privileged elite. It is their duty to join forces and provide tools of participation and action so that the social majority feel not only represented but have real resources to be heard. This is reflected in Podemos' current organizational model which provides various channels for participation.

We must not forget that within the organization there may be many different levels of participation. On the one hand there is the core or “nucleus”, the people who are the most heavily involved, and on the other there are supporters that participate to varying degrees. The lines of action must be oriented towards the social majority to which it aspires, not the nucleus. Towards supporting communities in their struggles – whether or not they support Podemos – in an effort to construct a major identity that is conscious of the importance of change and that (contrary to what boredom and the media blitz has produced in them) it is in their hands to carry out. And so groups like public servants, healthcare professionals, teachers, the unemployed, regardless of ideology based on outdated left-right divides, are gradually adding to the construction of large consensuses such as the defense of free, universal public health, the social right to housing, the recovery of lost labour rights, the fight against corruption, etc.

It is true that many of us come from very progressive environments, some of us will cringe to recall the legend of the POUM, or are avowed Republicans, others feel a sense of pride when the Internationale is sung, others are anarchists, some consider themselves eco-socialists or feminists, others come from being active in big parties. Some are newcomers to politics, but are as concerned as those who have been in activism since they were born.

Therefore with this in mind it is essential that we always remember that activist spaces are a means and not an end in themselves, to reach the broad social majority that needs us. We must be prudent not to assimilate activist spaces one hundred percent with that hegemonic project that is being constructed around us everywhere, and we must escape the perverse dynamics of the old politics that lead nowhere. Our goal is not to proselytize the extreme left, but we need to look beyond our activist navel, to regain the hope of people who feel identified with, and involved in, the project, and to recover the momentum that occurred early in the movement.

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