Mira Kudva Driskell

A Brief History and Future of Populist Social Movements in Spain

Introduction

This proposal presents an overview of post-democratization civil society in Spain into the history of the 15-M movement and the beginnings of Podemos. In addition, this paper also presents a theoretical lens through which to investigate Spanish populism and ends by questioning the future of Podemos and presenting a plan for future research.

Background and theoretical notes

A brief history of civil society in Spain, beginning with the post-Franco transition

From 1936 to 1939, Spain found itself in the midst of a brutal civil war between the Republicans of the Second Spanish Republic and the Nationalists of General Francisco Franco. Multiple scholars have noted that the Spanish Civil War can be considered a "grab bag" of wars—a class war, religious battle, nationalist conflict, and ideological confrontation all rolled into one (Holguin 2015, 1770). Following the Nationalists' victory, the Franco regime enacted a brutal reign of physical and psychological terror to express the regime's legitimacy, enforce the occupation, and consolidate counterrevolutionary measures (Holguin 2015, 1769). The scale of this violence diminished from the 1950s onwards, but memories of the Civil War and the terror of the Franco regime persisted well until Franco's death in 1975—and continue to shape the Spanish political landscape to this day in a manner that is hard to overstate. Future versions of this project will seek to provide a more thorough overview of this period of Spanish history, which is essential in understanding various socio-political conflicts in modern Spain.

For now, our analysis will shift to Spain's transition to democracy with a focus on how this transition shaped civil society actors—though again, the violence accompanying this transition should not be underplayed and will be explored with greater care in the future.

Robert Fishman's *How Civil Society Matters in Democratization: Setting the Boundaries of Post-Transition Political Inclusion* (2017), lays out three general theoretical claims for his comparative analysis of democratic transitions in Portugal and Spain: first, that civil society and democratization pathways are mutually constitutive during regime transitions; second, that any analysis of regime change must weave together cultural, socioeconomic, and political-institutional phenomena; and third and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, the cultural patterns put in place during democratization "shape the capacity of relatively low-income and resource-poor actors, even those with weak organizational assets, to achieve success in pursuit of policy and social objectives" (Fishman 2017, 405).

According to Fishman's analysis, the Spanish government during this time followed a top-down and reform-oriented approach to democratization, which left social and cultural structures from pre-democratization relatively intact—mostly because social hierarchies and cultural frameworks were considered to be outside of the reach of regime transition. In this way, Spain's transition to democracy was kept quite narrow (Fishman 2017, 398-399).

This approach to democratization has had a wide variety of impacts on Spanish civil society, with two particularly important aspects being political elites' reactions with civil society actors and a conservative approach to housing policy.

Fishman writes that, while Portuguese elites seemingly celebrated discord and protest from their constituents, Spanish political elites post-democratization—and to this day— tended to "keep protest at a distance from the centers of power", both by formally preventing protests at

the steps of the Congreso de los Diputados and by questioning the democratic legitimacy of protestors—thus creating a rather hostile political environment (Fishman 2017, 400). Additionally, Spanish housing policy has historically tended to favor home ownership and the construction sector, which created a giant housing bubble prior to the Great Recession. Spain's legal approach to foreclosures and the non-payment of mortgages has also established the country as an international outlier, as provisions greatly favor banks and have continued to disenfranchise one-time homeowners.

Following democratization, the Spanish party system became almost bipartisan, with the center-left Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) competing against various center right parties—first the Union de Centro Democratico (UCD), then the Alianza Popular (AP), and then the Partido Popular (PP). When the Great Recession began after the 2008 Spanish elections, 323 seats in Parliament were in the hands of PSOE and the PP, while third parties held only three seats and the remaining 24 seats were reserved for nationalist parties (Bosch and Duran 2019, 258). At the time of the great recession, PSOE was in power, and ultimately implemented orthodox austerity measures—which led to the PP reaching a majority in the next election.

Within this system, we see a persistent pattern of conventional economic voting, as well as a series of widely accepted policies within the Spanish political system that disenfranchise various civil society actors due to historical inattention to sociocultural hierarchies (Bosch and Duran 2019).

Podemos fills a specific political niche within the modern Spanish political regime. For one, the group has consistently spoken out against the Spanish democratic transition on the basis that democratization centered on the impunity of Franco's crimes, and has gone a step further in claiming that democratization installed an "oligarchic" government (Cervera-Marzal, 2020).

Reforming the 1978 Constitution was one of the key points in Podemos' election manifesto, and many members of the movement have challenged the legitimacy of the Spanish political class, citing incompetence and corruption (Cervera-Marzal, 2020).

In this way, we can understand the cycle of mobilization under the Great Recession as one which was centered in challenging the status quo as well as the political establishment which existed from democratization onwards—and we can also understand that this period of mobilization has been shaped by a relative indifference to the existence and problems of various civil society actors on the part of establishment politicians.

Theorizing populism within Podemos

Before delving into the history of the 15M or Indignados movement as well as the rise of Podemos, this paper will first establish a specific approach to framing this movement-party—which shall be followed in future research endeavors.

Populism is, of course, a contentious term, and often associated with far-right movements and authoritarian governments—oftentimes, individuals draw attention to Latin American dictators or the American People's Party as symbols of the follies of the "ideology".

This paper and project instead utilize the basic premises of Laclau's conception of populism—which, rather than seeking to define and limit the concept, is an ontological theorization of populism's specific logic of articulation. Within this theorization, populism can be understood as a method of analysis.

This theoretical approach is also supported by the nature of Podemos, which draws specific inspiration from the work of Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, among others. For one, Podemos' mere existence—which united individuals from the Izquierda Anticapitalista as well as the 15-M and intellectuals from la Universidad Complutense de Madrid—forms what is at the

very least a partial bloc aimed at uniting the left and achieving hegemony, thus playing into the mission laid out by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Social Strategy* (Ferraresi 2016). In addition, Podemos has effectively utilized the trans-class nature of anti-austerity protests to create an internal antagonistic frontier pitting "the people" against a corrupt elite.

However, as noted by populist scholar Paris Aslanidis, there are a series of issues with Laclau's post-structuralist approach:

> "Apart from its outdated Marxist overtones (Stavrakakis, 2004), a significant short-coming with respect to the objectives of this article is its purely qualitative and binary toolbox...while the Essex School methodological paradigm can contribute to holistic case-study appraisals of populist projects, it fails to provide objective comparative methodological instruments, remaining indifferent towards any quantitative valuations. Laclau (2005b, p. 47) explicitly defines populism as a graded concept, but never provides concrete means of operationalizing indicators to reveal variation in some detail; he only vaguely states that the degree of populism 'will depend on the depth of the chasm separating political alternatives." (Aslanidis 2016a, 97)

To this end, Aslanidis proposes reconceptualizing populism as a discursive frame, drawing on the tradition of the framing perspective from social movement studies (Aslanidis 2016b, 304). This does not represent a complete break from Laclau and Mouffe's scholarship on populism—thus, this paper will draw on both bodies of work, though its conceptualizing of populism as a discursive frame seems the most beneficial given the project's focus on the interactions between the party establishment and grassroots actors.

Podemos as a populist social movement

In line with this theoretical approach to populism, this paper will also treat Podemos as a populist social movement, once again drawing on the work of Aslanidis. Aslanidis defined populist social movements (PSMs) as theoretically encapsulating "the people" as a whole, pursuing a wholesale transformation of political processes to reinstate popular sovereignty, and making a consistent effort to "politicize citizen identity into a collective identity of a moral People" (Aslanidis 2016b, 306, 307, 310).

The 15-M movement and the beginnings of Podemos

The economic and political beginnings of the Spanish anti-austerity movement

As previously mentioned, the 2007-2009 global financial meltdown was met with strict austerity measures—largely due to heavy pressure from lending institutions including the European Central bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Commission, alongside national governments (Blyth 2013). In the Spanish context, the PSOE government's shift away from Keynesian stimulus-oriented approaches to the crisis came in 2010, when Rodríguez Zapatero**'**s government reformed the pension system and labor market, lowered salaries, and worsened the working conditions of public employees—among other offenses (Portos 2019a). Alongside neoliberal reform, Spain was also facing a political crisis due to ongoing corruption scandals and other unpopular policies—which led to large swaths of the population taking a critical stance against PSOE as well as the status quo. This was intensified following governmental replacement, as Mariano Rajoy's PP administration failed to make substantial changes in the face of economic downturn. Negative economic evaluations reached an all-time high of 93.6% in Christmas 2012, and continued to hover above 80% for most of 2013 and 2014. This, accompanied by a series of corruption scandals, and the fact that voters

were left with no alternative to austerity as both sides of the bipartisan government had enacted neoliberal reform, led to a general crisis of representation (Bosch and Duran 2019, 258).

Puerta del Sol and the formal beginnings of the 15-M movement

Amidst this turmoil, the group *¡Democracia Real Ya!* Organized a protest in the center of Madrid on the 15th of May 2011, ie 15-M, which was met with repression from law enforcement—which was by no means uncommon, neither historically nor in the context of anti-austerity demonstrations Portos 2019a). However, sympathizers reacted strongly, and within a few hours were occupying la Puerta del Sol, occupying the space through an encampment of hundreds of people. (Andretta and della Porta 2015, 39) Over the subsequent hours, occupations spread across most Spanish cities, and soon

> "The encampments rapidly evolved into 'cities within cities' governed through popular assemblies and committees…Decisions were made through both majority rules vote and consensus. The structure was horizontal, with rotating spokespersons in lieu of leaders. Tens of thousands of citizens were thus experimenting with participatory, direct and inclusive forms of democracy at odds with the dominant logic of political representation. Displaying a thorough mixture of utopianism and pragmatism, the new movement drew up a list of concrete demands, including the removal of corrupt politicians from electoral lists, while pursuing revolutionary goals such as giving 'All power to the People" (Postill, 2011 cited in Andretta and della Porta 2015, 39)

15-M was a historical revolt due to the number of people involved, media salience, transnational aspects, and widespread popular support (Portos 2019a). Approximately 6 to 8 million people ultimately became involved in 15-M activities, which made demonstrations the most well-attended events in Spain's history.

These new forms of protests mobilized the individuals who were most affected by austerity measures, as encampments were able to mobilize a large number of first-time protestors using participatory democracy in public spaces (Andretta and della Porta 2015, 40). These protests offered channels for Spanish citizens to articulate their grievances, and a shared critique of the political class brought about intense politicization as declining confidence in political parties was met with increased involvement in the movement itself (della Porta 2017, 184).

Activists were also able to draw off traditional actors in Spanish civil society such as unions, well established social movement organizations, NGOs, and professional organizations, thus uniting different sectors of civil society under a banner of anti-austerity demands (Portos 2019). Della Porta also notes that this period of time had a high degree of "eventfulness", with protests and campaigns stressing their transformative capacity and placing themselves within a narrative of structural transformation and subsequently increasing mobilization and becoming the *explanans* for future events (McAdam and Sewell 2001, p. 102; Sewell 1996; della Porta 2008 cited in Portos 2019a). Along with events facilitating cross-class coalitions in their opposition to the Spanish political elite, the manifesto of the 15-M movement also took on a populist tone.

The first paragraph of the manifesto states: "We are normal and ordinary people. We are like you: people, who get up every morning to study, work, or find a job, people who have family and friends. People, who work hard every day to provide a better future for those around us", with later sections stating that "We are anonymous, but without us none of this would exist, because we move the world" and emphasizing the importance of an "Ethical Revolution" (quoted in Aslanidis 2016b, 310). Understood within the context of the movement's "eventfulness", this discursive framing of the movement can be understood as the beginnings of

modern populism in Spain, as organizers crafted an identity for "the people"—thus forming what would become Podemos' political base.

Anti-austerity protests persisted for a considerable amount of time—in part because "radicalization was contained, institutionalization postponed and protesters' divisions avoided" (Portos 2016). Not all of this mobilization took place through public events—throughout this time period, the 15-M movement engaged in a strategy of downward shifting and coalition building, which likely contributed to continuous high levels of mobilization (Portos 2019a). However, this did not mean that organizing came to an end—rather, the 15-M decentralized through neighborhood assemblies and organized themselves around specific issues. Some engaged in a downward shift and became part of *mareas ciudadanas*,—citizen tides organized against around specific issues which included the *marea violeta*, a space for feminist exchange and debate Portos 2019b, 1452), and the *marea verde*, which organized against cuts in the public education system (Portos 2019a). Others engaged in further coalition building by building alliances with more established actors such as unions (Portos 2019a). Additionally, 15-M also decentralized through neighborhood assemblies. This led to decreased media visibility and may have decreased public engagement in the short term, but scholars have noted that this shift ultimately allowed for activists to reconnect with the grassroots public and specialize in diverse areas, thus creating a more intimate space for collective identity-formation (Perugorría and Tejerina 2013).

The Start of Podemos

15-M mobilization seems to have been declining from 2013 onwards (Portos 2019). Soon after the protests hit their peak, the news website *Publico.es* published "Moving the counter: converting indignation into political change", a manifesto signed by a group of political scientists

from Madrid's Complutense University (Pablo Iglesias, Íñigo Errejón, Juan Carlos Monedero, and Carolina Bescansa) alongside leaders of the Izquierda Anticapitalista (Jaime Pastor, Miguel Urban, and Teresa Rodríguez) (Cervera-Marzal 2020). The document insisted that the "social indignation" of the 15-M, or *Indignados* protests, had to be converted into an electoral and political majority to combat austerity policies. A few months later, in March, Podemos was officially formed. Della Porta notes that "Podemos emerged from a double condition: the empowering effects of the protest, but also its decline in response to the lack of institutional response", and that the manifesto demonstrated a perceived need for efficacy (della Porta 2017, 184).

That same year, PSOE and the PP lost about 40% of their support during European Elections, and the 4 month old Podemos gained 8% of the vote (Bosch and Duran 2019, 258). Later, when general election results came out, it was announced that the PP had won with 123 seats while PSOE received 90 seats, Podemos 69, and Ciudadanos 40 seats. This election effectively disrupted bipartisanship in the Congreso de los Diputados, as the biparsian share of seats had never fallen below 80% until that point (Bosch and Duran 2019, 258-259). These electoral campaigns also catalyzed support at the grassroots level, with 400 circles of Podemos opening shortly before the EU elections began (della Porta 2017, 187-188).

Iglesias played a significant role in Podemos electoral success—prior to the 2014 vote, only 7% of the electorate had heard of Podemos, while 50% knew of Iglesias through *La Tuerka*, a televised debate program hosted by the Complutense employees who would go on to lead Podemos (Cervera-Marzal, 2020). The program has continued through Iglesias' time in various elected positions, and the politician gained a much larger audience after he took office (Cervera-Marzal 2020).

In addition to televised debate, Podemos has also created a network of social and cultural centers, which began with the creation of *La Morada* in a working-class neighborhood of Madrid in 2015. Cervera Marzal (2020) writes: "The existence of such a center — inspired explicitly by the social-integration role played by communist parties in interwar Europe — indicates, like *La Tuerka*, that Podemos cannot be reduced to its party-political dimension alone". By drawing on the base of the 15-M protests, creating centers such as *La Morada*, and directly appealing to constituents via *La Tuerka*, Podemos has created a discursive strategy and organizational model that fits into the idea of a populist social movement, and could be considered a case study in a model of populism that transcends electoral politics and maintains a particular pluralist appeal.

Further questions and the current crisis of Podemos

But is this really the case? Podemos is currently at a crossroads. For one, Iglesias has recently announced his retirement from all his elected positions (Gilmartin and Greene 2021) following Podemos' all-around defeat during the Madrid regional elections, where the party lost to the far-right Vox (Tremlett 2021). Leadership of Podemos will likely pass on to labor minister Yolanda Díaz—a transition which will be fascinating in whether it disproves scholarly analysis of Podemos as a persona-based party. At the same time, Más Madrid, the party created by Podemos co-founder Íñigo Errejón has overtaken PSOE and come second after the PP in Madrid's regional elections. This moment is a critical juncture in Spanish populism, as well as the future of the Spanish left. To this end, this project will seek to further investigate the relationship between grassroots actors and political parties, seeking to understand the tensions underlying this relationship—and how these tensions will shape Podemos' future.

To this end, this project specifically asks: how have the grassroots actors involved in the 15-M movement continued to shape Podemos' successes and failures?

An internal survey from autumn 2016 indicates that 84% of active Podemos circles participated in different social movements and means of actions, activities that are accompanied by organizational practices that are partially inherited from the 15-M assemblies (Cervera-Marzal 2020). Therefore, it would appear that the 15-M movement has transitioned into modern day Podemos—however, such a claim fails to account for Podemos' poor performance in the polls. Clearly, the party has lost support from its base—this project will seek to understand why. Some have hypothesized that this is because Podemos is caught between the desire to integrate into the institutional-political arena as a political party and the desire to contest political parties as a social-movement organization (Cervera-Marzal). Regardless of the party's desires, I believe that some amount of Podemos' failure can be traced back to the party's relationship with "the people".

Through secondary source analysis and contacting individuals who are either directly or indirectly involved in Podemos, I hope to analyze the period of transition from 15-M to Podemos and understand how that transition has affected Podemos' current performance on the electoral stage. If possible, I would also like to contact individuals who are or have been involved in Podemos to conduct interviews and generally establish contact information in preparation for future fieldwork, a task which seems doable through connections to various people, at Cornell and beyond. I plan to specifically devote more of my attention to understanding Spanish history as well as to analyzing (and potentially translating) the most recent news sources for my work.

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