

# From the 'Indignados Movement' to power politics: a critical study of the theoretical underpinnings of 'Podemos'

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## 1. Introduction

In 2011, when the effects of the economic crisis had not fully developed and austerity measures were not entirely implemented, the *Indignados* or 15M movement appeared in Spain clamouring for a solution to the crisis that was not the imposition of austerity on the part of the European elites, but more democracy (Antentas and Vivas, 2012: 132; Antentas, 2015: 145; Flesher Fominaya, 2015: 142). Inspired by the ideas of participatory or deliberative democracy, they camped in the main squares of Spain to demand more political participation and citizen empowerment as an alternative to technocrats and austerity, but also to argue that a different conception of the political - based on values such as inclusiveness, autonomy or horizontality - was needed in order to generate alternative political scenarios.

In 2014, following four years of frenetic activity in social centres, universities and the streets, a group of activists and professors decided to create a party that would seize upon the political opportunity and capitalize on this discontent. The party was called *Podemos*, and expressed its desire to transform the previous social *indignation* into political change, as proposed in its founding Manifesto. With the right-wing in office and the left-wing destroyed by its initial support for austerity, *Podemos* represented an alternative that combined political ambition with the challenging position inherited from the *Indignados* Movement. In addition, it accompanied these ideas with rhetoric of public participation and popular empowerment, as well as a strong discourse against the 'old ways of relating to politics'.

In sharp contrast to this, from its birth there was a strong tension between *Podemos'* rhetoric of popular and democratic participation and the less democratic decisions of their leaders with regards to the party's internal

structure and political communication. For the critics of *Podemos*, what began with promise, started to disappoint due to the discursive shifts to the ideological centre, the spectacularization of its communication and the hierarchical control of the party by its leaders. For them, it had become a traditional party by developing a vertical structure, building a stage based on political marketing and mouthing rhetoric emptied of its initial critical energy (Mateo Regueiro, 2015).

In this paper, I would like to address this paradoxical evolution by proposing that this is not just a drift produced by the inherent characteristics of the party form, but rather a conflictual tension that can be derived from the very theoretical foundations of *Podemos*. In this sense, I will argue that these theoretical foundations are grounded in a series of premises that do not sufficiently challenge the political logic of liberal representative democracy. This forces the party to adopt a model that presents some similarities with what is encouraged by other realist theories of democracy such as Schumpeter's or Down's. As a result, the party has faced serious problems in escaping the competitive, hierarchical and efficacy-driven dynamic of a conception of politics that derives from an overemphasis on the goal of electoral victory.

To this end, I will devote a first section to analyse the political logic of liberal representative democracy. First, I will argue that this political logic is grounded upon a series of premises. These premises include a fragmented conception of the social and a self-sufficient and independent conception of the individual. Combined, these two presuppositions produce a pessimistic reading about the problem of political difference that requires a solution through coercion, which - in the case of liberal representative democracy - takes the form of the State's authority. As a consequence, liberal representative democracy shapes a political logic characterized by a particular focus on the conquest of this State power through competitive elections.

After that, I will analyse the theoretical underpinnings of *Podemos* in order to prove that they offer an insufficient challenge to the premises that influence the political dynamic of liberal representative democracy. For this purpose, and considering that the theoretical basis of *Podemos* is based on the adaptation on the part of some of *Podemos* leaders of the theories of hegemony and Left-Wing populism proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I will start this second section by analysing the theory of Chantal Mouffe. This will help show what I have found to be the main connections between her work and the above-mentioned liberal presuppositions. In this sense, I will argue that her agonist solution to Carl Schmitt's challenge solves the problem of political conflict in a way that is

compatible with the liberal representative conception of democracy, requiring a political logic that is based on (and even emphasizes more) the contestation of State authority through competitive elections. Furthermore, this initial focus on Mouffe's theory will help me to make a closer examination of her notion of antagonism, which provides a conception of the social upon which *Podemos'* use of hegemony is grounded. Following this, I will analyse how antagonism penetrates the ideas of Pablo Iglesias, Íñigo Errejón and other important *Podemos* leaders, resulting in a conception of politics characterized by a particular stress on sovereignty and instrumental reason. Finally, I will examine how the theory of hegemony is adapted to the praxis of *Podemos*, presenting two additional problems: the excessive importance of leaders and the banalization of discourse produced by an emphasis on electoral results.

## 2. The political dynamic of liberalism

Having come to be the dominant conception of democracy in the Western imaginary (Dunn 1994: 206), liberal representative democracy has had a long development since its establishment after the English, American and French Revolutions (Manin, 1997:1). In this sense, it is beyond my scope here to exhaustively analyse liberal representative government as a whole. On the contrary, what I would like to do is to highlight some of the characteristics that have conditioned the system's political dynamic. In this section, I will mainly use the analysis of contemporary political thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and Benjamin Barber insofar as they give especial attention to the elements that are most relevant to my analysis. Indirectly, I will also refer to the thinking of some modern liberal thinkers such as Sieyès, Constant and especially, Ferguson through the work of contemporary scholars.

In order to start my analysis, it is important to consider that the very concept of political community – upon which lies the very existence of the public sphere – suffered a severe process of critique during the birth of the liberal representative system. Firstly, it was considered a synonym of feudal coercion and dependency (Winch, 2002: 308); but most importantly, it started to lose importance in relation to the new commercial societies. These new commercial societies – characterized by a plurality of professions, skills and habits (Kalyvas and Katznelson, 2008: 53-55) - gave rise to diverse forms of life, which in turn were based upon the religious divergences deriving from the Protestant Reform. Thus, all these historical transformations contributed to set in motion the fragmentation of the idea of community into a series of private spheres (Fontana, 1994: xv-xvi). These private spheres facilitated the appearance of a set of contrasting philosophical anthropologies and concepts

of the good, signifying alternative motivations for human action (Kalyvas and Katznelson, 2008: 57). In this sense, commercial societies fostered an increasingly fragmented and individualized conception of the social (Pasquino, 1987: 217), in which the problem started to be how to manage the different relations between individuals, which became more and more conflictive. The liberal character lies precisely in a specific solution to this problem: it diagnoses incommunicability between these conceptions by denying the possibility to solve their differences in the public sphere, consequently sanctioning the fragmentation of the political community into a series of atomized spaces in forcefully conflictive relations (Kalyvas and Katznelson, 2008:61).

This potential for conflict among private spheres is, in the logic of liberal representative democracy, facilitated as well by a conception of the individual as an independent, atomized and disconnected agent (Barber, 1984: 6). Confined into an aggregate of private spheres, these individuals pursue their private goals in unlimited manners, and conceive their freedom as the absence of interference or constraint (Winch, 2002: 1). As a result of both this fragmentation of the community and thickening of the individual, most human relations tend to adopt the form of conflict or competition, as a function of either 'scarce resources, insatiable appetites or natural lust for power and glory' (Barber, 1984: 5). In any case, these conflicts are the product of unlimited self-interest (Kalyvas and Katznelson, 2008: 61), of 'boundless unreasoned (unmediated) desires' (Barber, 1984: 21). Among these competing individuals, 'none can be satisfied' (11), since the freedom of one limited the freedom of the other (Habermas, 1962 [1989]: 125).

In this sense, the liberal conception of democracy inaugurates a new conception of the polity that excludes the pursuit of happiness from its place in the public sphere (Pasquino, 1987: 220), and therefore privatizes the moral and the ethical realm. The combination of these two phenomena (a fragmented notion of the community and a thickened conception of the individual) produced a political community characterized by a twofold division. There is, first, the private sphere, which is composed of the majority of individuals or groups who pursue their private goals in the spheres of production and consumption (219). Second, there is the public sphere, which is made up of a smaller group of individuals, seeking to solve the political differences of the first group by acting as their representatives (Habermas, 1962 [1989]: 125; Winch,2002:294).

In order to solve this conflictive potential, the liberal solution to political difference involves a resort to a certain degree of coercion or violence, as formulated in the Weberian conception of the State (Weber, 1946: 31). As the chosen solution, it is the State that solves these divergences among

individuals through two different strategies. First, it establishes a series of formal rules to set the limits of the conflictual issues by excluding some affairs from the discussion, and it also guarantees a certain kind of civil peace based on a renunciation of decisively imposing an objective right or good above the protection of individual rights (Dunn, 1994: 223). Second, it offers a solution for the remainder of the conflicts based on dynamics of contestation. In this sense, the State's authority will enforce some of the competing claims after a competitive struggle for power. For this, the State must be conceived as the central locus of power (Pakulski, 2012: 46), and therefore, holds the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence (Weber, 1946: 31). This general scenario is eloquently illustrated with the Weberian image of the State, according to which it mediates between privatized groups, arbitrates their interests and imposes a solution through violence. In this context, privatized individuals and groups turn to this arbitrator to solve their divergences, seeking to be favoured or relieved through the activity of their representatives (Kalyvas and Katznelson, 2008: 74).

In conclusion, it could be argued that liberal representative democracy - as a consequence both of its privatized character and its definition of political conflict as something inevitable, recurring and only solvable through the mediation of State authority - promotes an instrumental conception of politics that makes the acquisition of State power its central objective. This conception opens a competitive playing field accepted, as I will later argue, by the theoretical foundations of *Podemos*. If democracy becomes, echoing the realist theorists of democracy, a mere method (Bachrach, 1969: 18-19; Pateman, 1970: 3; for the original source, vid. Schumpeter, 1968: 343), that is because politics is conceived as an instrumental activity (Elster, 1997: 19), a means to private ends (Barber, 1984: 11; Kalyvas and Katznelson, 2008: 61), where the conduct of public affairs is for private advantage (Barber, 1984: 4). For these reasons, the liberal public sphere often takes the form of a schizophrenic phenomenon: for some, politics becomes an insatiable 'art of power to whatever ends it is exercised' (11). For others, it implies de-politicization and growing indifference to objects of public nature (Kalyvas and Katznelson, 2008: 61).

Emphasizing the first of these views, the instrumental approach to politics entails a shift in that the means to implement the desired policies becomes the ends, resulting in the fact that power itself becomes the end of politics (Barber, 1984: 13; explicitly defended in Schumpeter, 1968: 355). This explains a certain obsession with success and efficientism, as well as the affirmation that competition is inherent to politics. But it also explains the instrumental rationality that totalizes political activities, which carry a series of dangerous consequences (objectualization, banalization...) for wider

conceptions of democracy based on social and communitarian values (Barber, 1984: 4).

In the light of these characteristics, it is easier to understand how the activities of *Podemos* are confined within the rules of the liberal democratic conception of politics. For all its participants, the specificity of the political within liberal representative democracy is a given solution to the problem of political conflict based on the competitive contestation of State authority (Barber, 1984: 5; Kalyvas and Katznelson, 2008: 73; explicitly defended in Weber 1946: 1), which involves a struggle for political supremacy organized around competitive elections (Pakulski, 2012: 43). In the second part of this text, I will examine to what extent the theoretical underpinnings of *Podemos* correspond with this realist conception of democracy.

### **3. Mouffe, Schmitt and the problems of antagonism**

The theoretical basis of *Podemos*, as their leaders recognize, is based on the Left-wing populist strategy theorized by Laclau and Mouffe (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 7), which is in turn based on the notion of antagonism and the theory of hegemony (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 13). In order to outline their analysis, I will devote the first section to the theory of Chantal Mouffe. Although the work of Ernesto Laclau is equally relevant in relation to *Podemos*, I have chosen to start by analysing Mouffe's agonistic pluralism for several reasons. First, her system shows more clearly the convergence with the liberal assumptions that I discussed. In this sense, I will argue that she theorizes a conception of politics that seems to accept the presuppositions of liberal representative democracy already mentioned, producing a similar instrumental approach to politics based on a competitive struggle aiming at acquiring State power. In addition, the thought of Mouffe will help me to examine the problems of her social model based on antagonism with a view to discussing in the following parts how it is adopted by the thought of *Podemos*' leaders and justifies their understanding of hegemony.

It is interesting to consider at the outset that Chantal Mouffe usually considers that the point of departure for her theory is to solve the tension between liberalism and democracy that is present in liberal democracy (2000: 4-5, 93 and 96; 2002a: 7). Moreover, Mouffe is deeply worried about the lack of participation that arises from the conception of the public sphere encouraged by the realist theories of Downs and Schumpeter (2000: 81-82). In order to solve this double problem, Chantal Mouffe rescues Carl Schmitt's critique of liberal democracy, framing it as a tension between the liberal and the democratic conceptions of society (2000a: 9; 2002: 7). According to Mouffe, Schmitt argues that liberalism's individualism creates a conception

of society characterized by division and irreconcilable difference that forcefully collides with stronger conceptions of community (Mouffe, 2002a: 8; Mouffe, 2002b: 5). As Mouffe argues (2002a: 7-11), the interest of Schmitt is to prove that democracy requires a *demos* with a certain degree of homogeneity or substance, since only in this way could strong notions of equality and citizenship be conceived. However, the equality that exists within this *demos* involves a correlation of inequality with respect to the otherness of the outside (8). This means, in other words, that the building of a *demos* requires an exteriority, a set of boundaries and limits that is incompatible with liberalism's pluralism. In this sense, liberal democracy is incapable of accepting the inescapably political character of the founding of the *demos* (12), and therefore, suffers from an absence of substance that then empties the content of its citizenship. In my opinion, it is in the agonist solution that Mouffe provides to this problem where the convergence with the above-mentioned liberal premises can be found. Furthermore, this solution has a strong influence on the conception of politics adopted by the leaders of *Podemos*.

Mouffe is right to point out that, through this frame, Schmitt presents a false dilemma between his concept of civil society (competition, disorder, pluralism) and the State (friendship, unity, order) (Mouffe, 2002a: 21-22). Contrary to this approach, she proposes using Schmitt's ideas to revitalize democracy by leaving the tension between liberalism and democracy always unresolved. In order to do so, she departs from rescuing the Schmittian notion of the political to restate that social identity depends on social bonds, which are in turn founded on the political decision of establishing boundaries (Mouffe, 2014: 150; Mouffe, 2002a: 12; Mouffe, 2002b: 7). These boundaries involve affirmations (of a substance) and inclusions (of members), but also negations and exclusions that tend to expel difference from them (Mouffe, 2002a: 12; Mouffe, 2002b: 7, Mouffe, 2000: 99). Mouffe (2000: 12 and 3) agrees with Schmitt in that every identity is relational (an *Us vs Them*), but for her it does not mean that this relation cannot be modified through time. On the contrary, Mouffe considers that Schmitt cannot reconcile difference within communities because of an essentialist notion of community that conceives of identities as already given and immutable over time (Mouffe, 2002: 22). Against this, the open character of the social as theorized with Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* allows Mouffe to overcome this essentialism and, therefore, produce a less closed conception of community whose identity can be revised throughout time (Laclau and Mouffe, [1985] 1987: 160 and 189). As a consequence, Mouffe conceives communities as something constructed throughout time, and therefore, as a political process in itself (Mouffe, 1999: 752; Mouffe, 2014: 151; Mouffe, 2002b:

6). For this reason, she concludes that pluralism is not a danger for democracy, but its very foundation (Mouffe, 2002a: 24), thus overcoming the Schmittian idea of pluriverse, according to which that difference is something that can only exist outside the community (Schmitt, [1932] 1995: 53).

It is at this moment that she proposes in several texts her model of agonistic pluralism to integrate that difference within communities (Mouffe, 1999: 754-755; Mouffe, 2000: 74). Under this name, she attempts to combine a consensual principle with a dynamic of agonistic contestation, so the *Us vs Them* identitary process can be made compatible with democratic institutions (Mouffe, 2014: 150; Mouffe, 1999: 755). The consensual principle is what ties the different groups together, and it is present in the agreement upon the *ethico-political* principles of democracy, namely liberty and equality (Mouffe, 2000: 102; Mouffe, 2002b: 9). On the other hand, the agonistic contestation allows for political difference to be expressed in the disagreement over the meaning, interpretation and implementation of these principles (Mouffe, 1999: 755). For her, this is what makes it possible to transform antagonism into agonism, and Schmitt's political enemies into political adversaries (Mouffe, 2000: 102-103; Mouffe, 2002b: 9).

One of the best contributions of Mouffe's agonism is that it enlarges the public sphere, since its concept of the political allows for reintroducing several affairs that were excluded in the liberal conception. In this sense, this will influence one of the most positive aspects of *Podemos*: the fact that it has been capable of challenging the economization of politics produced by neoliberalism. Nevertheless, what is striking in Mouffe's theory – and also influences *Podemos* – is that her attempt to integrate political difference within more cohesive communities totalizes political confrontation as the way to solve political conflict. In this sense, as I will argue later, it is possible to say that this solution does not differ so much from the competitive electoral struggle that characterizes liberal democracy. In any case, what Mouffe's agonism causes is the further strengthening of competitive dynamics by giving greater emphasis to the dimension of separation. This radicalization of the conflictual aspect has, in my opinion, a reductive effect that needs to be considered in detail before examining the convergence of Mouffe's theory with the above-mentioned liberal premises.

In this respect, it is possible to say that, even if Mouffe is more capable than Schmitt of reintroducing alterity within democracy, her problem is that she can only conceive of this alterity as immersed in antagonistic/conflictual dynamics and hegemonic/competitive relations. In other words, and despite her constant attacks on essentialism (Mouffe, 2000: 11 and 17), she finally essentializes the separatory dimension of political relations within

democracy, and pays too little attention to its opposite, that is, the unitary dimension of political relations. This becomes more problematic because, despite suggesting reasons for the appearance of this radical otherness within democracy, she barely offers any practical examples to qualify or test the character and intensity of antagonisms. Combined with a sceptical attitude towards the possibility of autonomy in the emission of consent,<sup>1</sup> this pessimism towards the possibility of agreement facilitates a rather instrumental conception of legitimacy. As a result, Mouffe continuously stresses the connection between power and legitimacy (Mouffe, 1999: 753) in ways that portray the latter as something to conquer rather than as a limit to respect based on the inclusivity of the claims, that is, in respecting the others' autonomy. As it will be shown, this will provide a basis for *Podemos'* use of hegemony.

In my opinion, if Chantal Mouffe holds this position, which is characterized by an emphasis on conflict and scepticism towards its resolution, it is because her system departs from a fragmented conception of the community founded on a radical division among its members. In fact, she seems to conceive of individuals and groups as essentially isolated, divided beings (Mouffe, 2014: 150). As a consequence of this radical division, the differences produced *in foro interno* concerning identities, interests and claims seem incommunicable. In this sense, Mouffe's theory appears to be convergent with liberal representative democracy in understanding the radical division of communities as the source for pluralism (2000: 18; 2014: 150), as well as in its assumption that this irreconcilable pluralism implies the end of a dialogical approach to the substantive idea of the good life (2000: 98).

In this respect, it is important to say that this sense of radical division is probably not coming from the same sources as liberal thought. As has been seen before, liberal thought received this idea more from a thickened conception of the individual and a theorization of the fragmenting consequences of commercial societies. One could argue that other realist theories such as Schumpeter's and Downs' inherit this because of their liberal affiliation, but this does not seem to be the case for Mouffe. In the case of her early texts, we might derive this sense of radical division from the Marxian notion of class struggle (Mouffe, 1979). However, she abandons the Marxian notion of class from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* onwards, at least for strategic purposes (Laclau and Mouffe, [1985] 1987: 149; Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 17 and 33). It could be argued, to consider a possible explanation, that even if she abandoned the notion of class for strategic purposes, the class divide somehow persisted in the form of a nostalgic identity of the Left that tries to reconstruct itself in the concept of antagonism (as in Laclau and

Mouffe, [1985] 1987: 291, Mouffe, 2002b: 2). In any case, and whether it is coming from a Leftist nostalgia to recreate the Left-Right division or a liberal remnant insufficiently challenged, what is clear is that her model still departs from the viewpoint of atomization and radical division, were it to be regarding individuals or groups. Under this fragmented notion of the social, even if community can contain more plurality, this plurality is the result of insulated groups and individuals that in their private sphere continue to create a set of incommunicable differences regarding their identities and ways of life. In this sense, Mouffe's theory converges with the liberal position in presenting a society characterized by insulation and isolation. It also shares, consistent with this, a pessimism regarding the possibility of agreement, and consequently reduces the process of political interaction to the victory/defeat binomial that results from confrontation, which in turn tends to foster an instrumental relationship to the other. As a result, her theory seems to foster a sovereign stance according to which individuals and groups are interested in political communities only insofar as there is the possibility to control them. For this reason, the theory of Mouffe necessitates, in the final analysis, the idea of the State, that is, the idea of a legitimate political space of authority that can resolve the differences among the parties through a competitive struggle for this authority.

In the end, it is surprising to ascertain how the theory of Chantal Mouffe - although in an evidently different manner due to its historical time, its theoretical sources and its intentions - leads to a conception of democracy that converges with the liberal representative one at least in the presuppositions mentioned before. First, as a central element, it presents an individualized understanding of community, characterized by isolation, atomization and the existence of an ineradicable division among its members. Second, it is characterized by a response to political difference based on confrontation. Third, this competition ultimately necessitates the intervention of the State, which appears as a conquerable space of legitimate political authority and configures a political process characterized by competitive dynamics. Finally, and as a consequence, an instrumentalist approach to politics is fostered, so the conquest of power becomes the main objective.

For this reason, one could see Mouffe's thought as a realist theory of democracy, stressing notions such as hegemony, power, or the public sphere as a battlefield (Mouffe, 2014: 151). In this sense, even if she tries to shape a theory against the realist theories of democracy proposed by Schumpeter or Downs, there are elements that could be said to resemble and even justify the competitive model proposed by them. For example, democracy again becomes described as a 'method' that does not take a side (154). Moreover,

institutional stability becomes an objective, something illustrated in how conflict is shaped in a way that can integrate discontent within the political system against more rupturist antagonisms (Mouffe, 1999: 756). Finally, the passions are considered in a similar way, as something that can be tamed and mobilized for democratic ends (Mouffe, 2002b: 10). In this sense, they are used to solve disaffection by making a vibrant public sphere (15), something that – apart from presenting a reductive view of the affective – clearly echoes the theories of political marketing (Scammel, 2014: 2), whose approach has been clearly useful for the realist theories in order to gain the attention of the public (32-33).

It is this conception of democracy, stressing the control of State power and the importance of passions in mobilizing the citizenship, which will be considered further in the next section. Specifically, I will consider how antagonism presents the basis for a sovereign and instrumental conception of democratic politics that is even radicalised with the ideas of the leaders of *Podemos*.

#### 4. Political and electoral ammunition

As I suggested before, in considering conflict as unsolvable, the role of antagonism in Mouffe's system undervalues the unitary dimension of democracy and produces a privatist approach that totalizes confrontation as the only form of political relation. It has been said that this confrontational politics solves political conflict in a way that fits in with the competitive patterns that are characteristic of liberal representative democracy. Nevertheless, as was considered in the previous section, the reasons for building a political dynamic based on confrontation are similar to the liberal position only insofar as they depart from a fragmented conception of society; but they differ in the reasons that are provided for that fragmentation.

In the case of *Podemos*' leaders, it is easier to find explicit political reasons for this sceptical position towards democracy and its unitary dimension regarding either the European or the Spanish contexts. On the one hand, these authors usually refer to a European context characterized by an absolute victory of neoliberal hegemony (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 23; Iglesias, 2015a: 27), which results in a progressive dismantling of the Welfare State and the loss of national sovereignty to the benefit of private power (Iglesias, 2015b: 8-9). Furthermore, this situation has worsened since the last crisis, due to the undemocratic imposition of austerity by the European elites (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 18; Iglesias, 2015a: 29), something that took special relevance with the financial *coups* of Monti and Papademos. This facilitates a particular taste of defeat that can be shared by most of the

European Left (Iglesias, 2005b: 17), but takes a special intensity among the leaders of *Podemos* because of various features of the Spanish context. Firstly, it is possible to perceive a feeling of historical defeat of the Left following the Spanish Civil War (Iglesias, 2014a: 105; Iglesias, 2014b: 99-104). Secondly, there has been a critical attitude adopted towards the Spanish Transition, with an analysis that it served to perpetuate a political and economic model based on the benefit of the few and the spoliation of the State (Iglesias, 2015b: 10-11; Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 20-22). Thirdly, there is the impact of the crisis in Spain, which has facilitated what these authors consider to be an oligarchic offensive by the national elites (19).

This feeling of historical defeat against the elites facilitates a closed antagonistic identity that converges with the analysis of social emergency in the countries of the South. Together, they both provide these leaders with a sense of defeated legitimacy that justifies an approach to politics based on *means* and provides the best basis for the adoption of Laclau and Mouffe's antagonism. In this sense, antagonism allows a focus on military vocabulary that echoes Gramsci's *Modern Prince* in trying to transform a Leftist nostalgic lamentation into a more efficient will. Among the main leaders of *Podemos*, it is Íñigo Errejón who puts the greatest stress on military efficiency. Thus, for example, in theorizing hegemony, he points out that words, discourses, concepts or ideas are just hills to conquer by the different combatant discourses (Errejón, 2014: 82). In a similar vein, he describes the participation of *Podemos'* leaders on TV as providing political ammunition for people's daily combat for their freedom (cited in Iglesias, 2014b: 19). Moreover, he justifies the adoption of a more vertical model in the founding Assembly of the party because it was necessary to build an electoral machine, a swift instrument for a short cycle oriented towards an electoral *blitzkrieg* (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 137). Finally, the military approach is clearly explicit in one of the recent concepts that he declared he was researching: 'relative irreversibility'. Within the frame of a war of positions, this concept involves the capacity of winning positions to such an extent that they become irreversible, with the result that even adversaries have to accept such positions to defend their own (100-101).

In light of these assertions, and despite the social emergency of the European and Spanish present contexts, it is possible to claim that adopting antagonism as a social basis might also cause some problems when it is applied to political practice. For example, it could be said that whereas some radical divisions might work for agitation purposes, antagonisms might run the risk of opening a space for objectualization and instrumentalization when considered as the central political logic. In this respect, and unlike other efficientist approaches used by the realist theories of democracy, it might be

argued that the use of this military approach relies on a simplification of the political field provoked by antagonism. In this sense, the insistence on transforming every identity and political relation into an *Us vs Them* dynamic tends to ignore the complexity of contemporary societies, which produce multiple conflicts that are not always articulated into binary forms, whether derived from Left-Right, Bottom-Up or People-Elite divisions. Consequently, the military approach puts under constant threat inclusiveness within the organizations and pluralism within societies, which tend to produce divergences in analysis sometimes in contradiction with efficiency. In this sense, and far from fostering and safeguarding inclusiveness in the way the 15M Movement did, the military approach tends to leave in the hands of the leadership the degree of difference that is acceptable within the identity articulations. Thus, antagonism facilitates the adoption of a sovereign stance, which is clear in the application of techniques such as 'relative irreversibility' to the different confrontations, insofar as it is this leadership that monopolizes the ability of separating friends from enemies. An ability which, in a very schmittian sense, constitutes for Errejón the true essence of power (Errejón, 2014: 86; vid. Schmitt, [1932]1995:45).

It is this sovereign stance which, as a response to the radical division produced by antagonism, facilitates a political logic that is ultimately sustained by coercion (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 76; Iglesias, 2015a: 102; Iglesias, 2014b: 32, 43). What is difficult to understand, as it is in the case of Mouffe's notion of adversary, is how this stress on the military dimension of politics can strengthen democracy without triggering an expansive logic that, without clear limits, might damage the cohesion of political groups and diminish the ability of their members to resolve the conflict in alternative manners. In this respect, it is not surprising that both in consonance with Mouffe and the liberals, the leaders of *Podemos* end up necessitating the State to put a limit to this violence (Irraberri, Alegre, Iglesias, 2014: 33-37, 48; Iglesias, 2015a: 28; Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 41-45, 67-76). However, in the case of *Podemos'* leaders, it is striking to notice the rawness of their positions, plagued with several references to Schmitt and Weber. This is illustrated, for example, when Iglesias stresses that the State is founded on violence (Iglesias, 2014b: 38). Along the same lines, Juan Carlos Monedero describes the political bond as combining force and ideology, but being in *ultima ratio* based on physical violence (Monedero, 2014: 25).

One could say that, in the thought of Monedero, Iglesias and Errejón, consent acquires a key role as a basis for political power. However, this consent is never considered as a limit or as an end in itself, but it is always approached from an instrumental standpoint, considered as a way to acquire State power. As we have seen with Mouffe, the theory of hegemony already adopts an instrumental approach to political consent. However, this acquires

a special emphasis in the texts of *Podemos'* leaders (Irraberri, Alegre, Iglesias, 2014: 38; Monedero, 2014: 24-26). In this sense, the Machiavellian metaphor of the centaur is recovered only to stress this dual dimension of political power as a combination of persuasion and coercion, that is, as a way to characterize the soft and hard dimensions of power in order to make the best use of the two (Iglesias, 2014a: 96-100).

For these reasons, and despite the democratic rhetoric, in my opinion *Podemos* leaders tend to privilege to excess the sovereign dimension of politics in a way that can empty the meaning of democracy and transform it into just a method of acquiring power, as it was the case with the realist theories of democracy. This can be illustrated in considering how Iglesias characterizes legality as the rationalized will of the victors (Iglesias, 2014b: 41) or the sovereign (Iglesias, 2014c: 61-62), proposing therefore that behind political decisions there is no debate of ideas, but the force to impose one's own will (Iglesias, 2014b: 41). In this way, politics is understood as the art or technique of the State (Iglesias, 2014a: 95), that is, the ability to control it in order to dispose of the power of politics over laws and institutions (Iglesias, 2014b: 25).

Although it is hard to deny that in contemporary societies political power also possesses an important coercive dimension, it is at the same time evident that this excessive stress on the sovereign dimension of politics exercises an impoverishing effect on democracy by foreclosing any way to resolve political conflict that stands as an alternative to coercion, and therefore, any attempt to found politics on consent. In this sense, it has been proven so far how this consequentialist approach to consent can only produce an instrumental attitude towards its emitter. This last formulation, however, shows most clearly how the ideal of autonomy that was sought during the *15M* Movement is rather abandoned as an objective. This occurs because the perception of consent as always heteronomously produced converges with an emphasis upon the sovereign dimension of politics, which puts even greater stress on the instrumental valorization of consent – the source of legitimacy - by considering persuasion as a pillar of political power (Errejón, 2014: 89). Together with this resignation towards autonomy, it is this instrumental consideration of legitimacy and consent what provides the principal justification for the use of hegemony.

## **5. Princes, intellectuals and celebrities**

If antagonism is one of the major pillars of Laclau and Mouffe's theory, it could be said that hegemony constitutes the second (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 13). Together, they form the basis for the strategy of Left-Wing

Populism. This approach proposed that for specific contexts of institutional weakness (89), attempts could be made to help the people to rescue the State (considered kidnapped by hegemonic elites), so that they could use it as a governance tool for the benefit of the majority (69). As a political practice following this strategy, hegemony would consist of the building of a transformative political subject (people) through the articulation of diverse and initially dispersed demands in a relation of antagonism (Laclau and Mouffe, [1985] 1987: 231). This articulation implies, on the one hand, the creation of a border that dichotomizes the social creating an exteriority (228). On the other hand, it seeks the articulation of a series of subject positions<sup>2</sup> in order to pinpoint them in chains of equivalence that are always in opposition to that exteriority (Laclau and Mouffe, [1985] 1987: 227, 231; Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 87).

The leaders of *Podemos* have recognized the influence of Left-Wing populism as the basis for their strategy (Iglesias, 2015b: 14; Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 7). It dovetails with their diagnosis of the Spanish situation as an organic crisis (Iglesias, 2015b: 10-14; Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 89-91), and also with the fact that this breaking of the institutional-organic consensus is accompanied by an absence of references and narratives for discontent (89). The theory of hegemony thus appears as a powerful tool to break a hegemonic dominion that is threatened but not entirely gone – represented in Spain with the consensus around the so-called 'regime of 78' – in order to recover the control of the State, so as to socialize the power that has been hoarded by the elites (Iglesias, 2014b: 13; Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 121). For these reasons, it constitutes the theoretical basis for the discourse against the Spanish elite, to which they give the name *casta*.

Apart from the instrumental consideration of legitimacy and consent that I have mentioned (with the consequent dangers of objectification), two more problems might be presented as the result of the application of this theory on the part of *Podemos*. These problems show a certain similarity with others caused by the realist theories of democracy, and certainly prove a contradiction with the actions and spirit of the *15M* Movement. The first issue concerns the excessive role of the intellectuals that, as it will be argued, might be a consequence of the overstress on the ideological dimension of politics. The second difficulty derives from the fact that hegemony, in the case of *Podemos*, might be seen as just a strategy towards the conquest of State power, and therefore presents some limitations.

Before examining the first, it is important to contrast the Gramscian concept of hegemony with its re-elaboration by Laclau and Mouffe. Thus, it is important to highlight that they reject any form of determinism that was present in some trends of Marxist discourse, according to which identities

are predetermined by positions in the economic structure antagonism (Laclau and Mouffe, [1985] 1987: 150, 175). On the contrary, these authors theorize that political identities are produced in the ideological field, and therefore, are the product of contingent articulations through discursive practices (153, 182). In this sense, the authors rescue the Gramscian concept of hegemony to illustrate this disputable articulation of subject positions (234). Furthermore, they follow Gramsci in considering that the processes of ideological-discursive articulation are capable of generating political subjects beyond their position on the economic structure (232). However, they reject Gramsci insofar as they do not think that the working class is the fundamental class of any articulation (123, 229, 234). Moreover, they deny the possibility of ultimately resolving social divisions in the form of a revolution (293 – 294). For them, it is crucial that the social order remains opened and never totally sutured (82, 160-161, 179), since any social order (and any narrative) constitutes a political decision that creates inclusions and exclusions (233). In this sense, Laclau and Mouffe's hegemony stresses the ideological-discursive level with a particular emphasis on the articulation of political subjects.

*Podemos'* leaders also conceive hegemony in a populist key in that they understand that the main task of politics involves the creation of subjects capable of being mobilized (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 49-50). Consequently, the most important political activity lies in the production of new narratives, grammars and ways of defining reality for the creation of political subjects (Errejón, 2014: 80; Iglesias). Thus, hegemony aims to dispute the definition of reality and its concepts (Iglesias, 2012), building shared meanings (Errejón, 2014: 82) as a way to influence the public opinion of the masses (Domínguez and Giménez, 2014: 122). Therefore, in the field of politics there is also a primacy of ideology and the discursive (Sanz Alcántara, 2015; Iglesias, 2015b: 14), and a displacement towards the cultural domain (Iglesias, 2014a: 97; Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 37).

Consistent with this shift to the ideological-cultural terrain, the leaders of *Podemos* have defended the importance of engagement with the mass media as a battlefield (Iglesias, 2012). Since they think that the structuring of practices of meaning and the mediation of collective imaginaries are now mostly present in audio-visual dispositives (Iglesias, 2014c: 17), they argue that mass politics must consider TV (but also Internet) as the ideological dispositive *par excellence*, because it moulds, educates, conditions and teaches to a greater degree than formal education or family (Iglesias, 2015b: 15). Consequently, the activity of these leaders in the different talk shows aims to produce arguments, opinions and political attitudes (16) that can serve as political ammunition for the daily battle to define reality (Giménez, 2014a:

39).

Despite its intelligent analysis of ideology, the main problem of this conception is that, both in its intellectual version and in its practical application on the part of *Podemos*, the ideological-discursive focus that characterizes Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony stresses the central and dominant role of intellectuals (Sanz Alcántara, 2015). In the words of Wood, quoted by Sanz Alcántara, the intellectuals are ultimately the ones in charge of building the social agents (Sanz Alcántara, 2015; Wood, 1986: 6). For that reason, Wood considers that this theory considers that the 'inchoate mass that constitutes the bulk of "people" still remains without a collective identity, except what it receives from its intellectual leaders, the bearers of discourse' (Woods, 1986: 6). In addition to that, this overemphasis of the role of intellectuals is increased because of the importance that these authors give to strong and charismatic leadership in order to mobilize the passions and longings of the public, making possible the recognition of a chain of equivalence as hegemonic (Sanz Alcántara, 2015). Thus, both Laclau and Mouffe point out that it is necessary to have a charismatic leadership to represent unity (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 98), to symbolise the political subject as a whole (Laclau, 2005: 100). This theorization provides a very good platform for the leaders of *Podemos* (Sanz Alcántara, 2015), whose understanding of the role that leaders play in hegemony is similar in their texts (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 98; Iraberri Pérez, Alegre Zahonero and Iglesias, 2014: 47). For this reason, in relation to practices of the party, it is also possible to examine *Podemos'* understanding of leadership in the light of Laclau and Mouffe's re-interpretation of the Gramscian intellectual and moral leadership.

With regards to the intellectual leadership, the leaders of *Podemos* understand that it involves the creation of practices of meaning that could produce cognitive frames and antagonistic political identities, such as *people vs casta*. In this sense, Errejón argues that leadership contributes to glue together the symbolic and cultural arsenal put at the service of the people by ideological practices. The leader, according to Errejón, represents the collective will and serves as a catalyst (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 97-99). Furthermore, this intellectual leadership also serves to acquire initiative and centrality (Iglesias, 2015a: 24; Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 49) in a way that resembles the famous passage of Gramsci's *Modern Prince* (Gramsci, 1971: 133).

With respect to the moral leadership, several members affirm its importance as well. In Pablo Iglesias's words, *Podemos'* discourse worked because people identified with them, and not with the old elites (Iglesias, 2015b: 17). In coherence with this, it is possible to observe the application of

this idea in *Podemos'* style of presenting their candidates as ethical referents. On the other hand, Carolina Bescansa emphasizes the importance of visibility as a way to obtain recognition. Thus, she affirms that the accumulation of media capital on the part of *Podemos* was key to influencing the formation of mass public opinion, and therefore, in the formation of big majorities (Domínguez and Giménez, 2014: 123). A similar argument is provided by Iglesias, who argues that this visibility was obtained thanks to the figure of the *talk show guest*, who becomes a 'reference-point' for the people (Iglesias, 2015b: 17). It is for this reason that both Bescansa and Iglesias justified the decision of printing the face of Iglesias on the ballot for the European Elections (Domínguez and Giménez, 2014: 128; Iglesias, 2014b: 10).

It is interesting to notice how with *Podemos* the interpretation of the Gramscian moral-intellectual leadership takes a form that resembles the functions of the leaders described by realist political theories such as Schumpeter. Thus, it is the leader who articulates the collective demands with intellectual-ideological direction (defining reality) and represents them with moral leadership (serving as a visible example, that is, a symbol). In this sense, it is clear that *Podemos'* understanding of hegemony presents a strong interest in offering efficient tools in the creation of counter-hegemonic senses. On the other hand, it also presents some problems related to the excessive role of intellectuals. First, in restricting the production of meaning to a certain minority (the intellectuals), the possibilities of a collaborative or participative construction of alternative narratives might be limited. Therefore, this understanding of hegemony - despite the fact that Errejón affirms that 'all hegemony is necessarily *stained* with other groups' positions' (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 141) - always incorporates these positions under the primacy of a leading sector (35). For this reason, it runs the risk of expelling at least three groups from the production of meaning. On the one hand, the party members, whose participation is restricted in favour of the leadership. On the other hand, it also excludes the allied collectives, in attempting to hegemonize and encompass their claims. Finally, the citizens, who are disempowered and treated as passive spectators, are also left out. In this respect, and despite the evident electoral revenues, to overstress the role of intellectuals and leaderships might not only undermine horizontality, but also weaken democratic attitudes such as self-responsibility, which is not promoted with respect to critical attitudes towards ideological domination.

As discussed earlier, together with the problem of the role of intellectuals, the adaptation of hegemony might also be problematic if it is conceived only as a means towards the conquest of State power. In relation

to this, the excessive emphasis on the sovereign dimension of democracy on the part of the leaders of *Podemos* that has been noted before might be leading to a fetishization of the conquest of the State as the main political objective, since it possesses the ultimate guarantee for political obedience (coercion) (Errejón, 2014: 89). As a result, it is true that this State-centred application of hegemony involves a more efficient understanding of the electoral dynamics, and in fact, it is indeed more capable of obtaining victories in this field. Nevertheless, it produces the counter-effect that hegemony is built mainly with regards to the electoral terrain, and therefore, it runs the risk of subordinating its disruptive logic to its aggregative one.

Thus, whereas in the words of Iglesias, *Podemos* has been so far capable of building a new popular subject against the elites with the 'ideological constructs' provided by the 15M (Iglesias, 2015b: 14) – which were themselves disruptive, according to the leaders of *Podemos* (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 63) – it could be said that beyond that, *Podemos* has been less capable of generating new disruptions due to the electoral logic of aggregation. In this respect, and beyond the re-articulation of this new consensus into populist forms (*casta vs people*), it could be said that the aggregative logic might have caused an exhaustion of the creative and disruptive capacity of *Podemos'* discourse that contrasts with the case of the 15M Movement. Far from being a mere consequence of the difference between social movement and party or an effect of wear, this is consistent with two ideas that do not necessarily have to be present in the party form. The first consists of conceiving the State as the principal and primary objective, which pushes towards aggregating votes as much as possible, and therefore, to converge with an epochal common sense that it has not yet had the possibility to transform. The second idea is a consequence of the first, and it takes the form of a populist discourse that drives towards building an identity on the basis of empty signifiers, therefore tending to privilege the use of deliberate, ambiguous and open meanings for the sake of aggregating positions to the political subject (Sáenz Alcántara, 2015).

In conclusion, and beyond what *Podemos* might have harvested from the disruptive 15M positions, its short term electoral perspective might force it to converge with the social majorities and replicate some opinions that are still hegemonized by the dominant ideologies. In this sense, since the fetishization of the State as the primary political objective traps it in a dynamic of aggregating votes, it has to be much more cautious when sowing the seeds of a new common sense, which diminishes even more the emancipatory potential of an already verticalized understanding of hegemony. Thus, the majoritarian vocation of a discourse that may be flattered for being efficient with respect to winning votes, might at the same

time lose its balance with the necessity to still engage with challenge and rupture to the existing ideological order.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have undertaken a close examination of the theoretical underpinnings of *Podemos* with a view to examining its controversial political trajectory in relation to the 15M Movement. In this sense, I have attempted to propose an explanation to this political drift that could go beyond the classical movement - party dilemma. On the contrary, I have proposed that the problems stemming from *Podemos* practice can be derived from a specific conception of democracy produced by the theoretical basis of the party, insofar as it is unable to successfully challenge the political logic of liberal representative democracy.

In order to prove this, I have devoted a first section to examine two premises that I consider a key factor in the appearance of the political logic that characterizes the liberal representative democracy. These premises present 1) a privatized conception of society characterized by fragmentation, and 2) a certain atomization of its members, who either as individuals or as groups, are described as isolated and self-sufficient. I have proposed that liberalism faces this double phenomenon by assuming the incommunicability of the differences concerning identities and ways of life that are produced in the private sphere, which produces a pessimism regarding the possibilities of agreement in the case of conflict. As a result, liberal thought requires a solution to political conflict that takes the form of a regulated confrontation controlled thanks to the participation of the State. Finally, the excessive importance of the intervention of the State to solve political differences generates a political system that fosters an instrumental conception of politics by reducing it to a struggle for political supremacy organized around competitive elections.

During the second part, I examined these ideas in relation to the theoretical underpinnings of *Podemos*, which are based on Laclau and Mouffe's theories of hegemony and Left-wing populism. First, the compatibility between the liberal premises mentioned above and the theoretical underpinnings of *Podemos* was discussed through a closer examination of Chantal Mouffe's theory. In this sense, her concept of antagonism has been proved to facilitate a sense of radical division and a response to political difference that are compatible with these liberal premises. This produces a political system that resembles liberal representative democracy in fostering an instrumental approach to politics based on a competitive confrontation aiming to acquire State power. On the

other hand, antagonism has also been proven to radicalize the patterns of competition and rivalry by stressing the dividing dimension of democracy and totalizing confrontation as the central political logic. In this respect, I have argued that this concept of antagonism plays an important role in the thought of the leaders of *Podemos*, which in turn worsen its effects by overemphasizing the sovereign dimension of democracy so as to create a more efficient political strategy. As a consequence, the leaders of *Podemos* propose a model of politics that, in privileging coercion over agreement, runs the risk of reducing democracy to a mere method of acquiring State power and puts even greater stress on the instrumental valorization of legitimacy and consent. Lastly, I have argued how this instrumental valorization of consent provides the basis for *Podemos'* use of the theory of hegemony, which gives rise to two additional problems similar to the ones caused by the realist theories of democracy: the excessive role of intellectuals and the banalization of discourse produced by an emphasis on electoral results.

In conclusion, this work has also allowed me to show that - despite the fact that they start from different points of view, principles, and objectives - there is a significant convergence between the application by *Podemos* of Laclau and Mouffe's Left-wing populism and other realist theories of democracy such as Schumpeter's or Downs'. This is, first of all, evident in how the theoretical foundations of *Podemos* accept the political logic of liberal representative democracy in order to win in an uncritical but also efficient manner. In this sense, both models share a particular focus on the goal of acquiring State power through competitive elections, which consequently makes them particularly sensitive to notions of efficiency, leadership, rivalry and systematic organization. Therefore, they promote a means-oriented model of politics, which becomes clear in their instrumental approach to the political process. For this reason, they give rise to conflictive relations with participatory processes, which are at the same time both needed and limited. As a consequence, the presence of this approach makes it difficult for *Podemos* to conjugate its political practice with values that were present in the 15M Movement such as inclusiveness, autonomy or horizontality.

Up until now, it is beyond doubt that this has helped *Podemos* in winning electoral support. However, it might be less helpful with regards to the challenges ahead for the party, related to the wear that *Podemos* has suffered in the last cycle of elections and the loss of part of its challenging potential. It is impossible to propose a developed alternative to solve these challenges here due to the limitations of space. However, this would constitute, without doubt, an interesting and stimulating endeavour that could provide the basis for future work.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>We will come back to this in the following sections, but this might be caused by a scepticism concerning the very possibility of autonomy deriving from a critique of the self-mastery of the subject that is both present in the works of Lacan and Foucault, which are clear influences of Mouffe's work (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015: 11). In any case, this scepticism towards autonomy could be the reason behind Mouffe's argument that the objective of deliberative democracy is to eliminate power (Mouffe, 2000: 100; Mouffe, 1999: 753) and not to transform heteronomy into autonomy, which I would consider more accurate.

<sup>2</sup>As Torfing argues, Laclau and Mouffe rely on the Althusserian notion of 'subject positions' to define the notion of hegemony. In replacing the notion of subject by 'subject positions within a discursive structure', they understand that these 'subject positions are neither totally dispersed nor unified around a transcendental subject, but articulated into relatively unified ensembles in and through hegemonic struggles'. (Torfing, 1999: 52; for the original, Laclau and Mouffe, [1985] 1987: 195-196)