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# Podemos: A “Party-Movement” in Government

BY

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Upon its creation in 2014, Podemos insisted it was nothing like the political parties that had long dominated Spain. Today, Pablo Iglesias’s party looks like an ever-more institutionalized force — yet one whose activists continue to see themselves as belonging to a “social movement” from below.

After four general elections in four years, January 7 saw the formation of an unprecedented coalition government in Spain. The incoming administration unites Pedro Sánchez’s Socialist Party (PSOE) and Pablo Iglesias’s Unidas Podemos, today taking up cabinet roles for the first time.

As Iglesias’s radical-left formation enters government, six years since its initial creation, some like sociologist Carlos Taibo say it has become a classic party. Pointing to its gradual institutionalization, such readings suggest Podemos is no longer the “movement” that emerged from the 15M anti-austerity protests of 2011.

But while Podemos has indeed been institutionalized — and has also lowered its ambitions since its first election run in 2014 — this has not yet brought any full break with its roots. Looking at the first years of its existence, we instead see that it remains a hybrid force — and one whose future remains in the balance between institutional pressures and the demands of the street.

# Indignation Into Change

To understand this, it’s useful to look back to how Podemos emerged. On January 12, 2014 the news website *Publico.es* published a manifesto entitled “Moving the counter: converting indignation into political change.” The text was signed by around thirty intellectuals from the worlds of academia, culture, journalism, and activism.

There was a collaborative initiative, uniting a group of political scientists from Madrid’s Complutense University — including Íñigo Errejón, Juan Carlos Monedero, and Carolina Bescansa — and the leaders of the far-left Izquierda Anticapitalista, including Jaime Pastor, Miguel Urban, and Teresa Rodríguez.

Their text insisted on the need to “convert the social indignation” expressed by the 2011 *Indignados* (or 15M) protests into a “political and electoral majority” — one that could combat the austerity policies demanded by the European Union. That March, Podemos was formally established as a political party — and soon began its electoral rise, powerfully destabilizing Spain’s historically dominant social-democratic (PSOE) and conservative (Partido Popular, PP) parties.

Podemos arose in a context profoundly marked by the *Indignados* movement, which saw hundreds of thousands of people occupying public squares in dozens of big cities across several weeks. As Donatella Della Porta emphasizes in a recent book, Podemos maintained a close relationship to these mobilizations.

This is not to sign up to the hackneyed notion that it is “the party of the *Indignados*.” After all, not only were many other formations born in the wake of 15M, but Podemos itself also drew on other sources of inspiration (from South American socialist governments to the student and pacifist mobilizations of the 2000s).

But this reading does, at least, have the merit of embedding Podemos in the political era that began in 2011, identifying this as the context that gave its challenge to the established parties meaning. And this raises a further question: is Podemos a party “like the others”?

## Beyond the Party

Several clues suggest that we would be wrong to reduce Podemos to a political party alone. After all, even before it was constituted as a party, the hard core of its leaders from the Complutense hosted a televised debate program (*La Tuerka*) which soon became Spain's most-watched politics program. As those who later founded Podemos declared back in 2010, "If the media doesn't come to you, become the media yourself." This was the instrument through which its main host, Pablo Iglesias Turrión, became known to the wider public.

The charismatic Iglesias played a significant role in Podemos's success in the May 2014 European elections. A poll published on the eve of the vote revealed that only 7 percent of the electorate had heard of the political party Podemos — whereas 50 percent knew of Iglesias. Podemos's launch did not put an end to *La Tuerka* but, on the contrary, coincided with a shift from weekly to daily broadcasts, an increase in audience numbers, and the launch of a second program — *Fort Apache* — also produced by the production company (*Con Mano Izquierda*) belonging to Podemos's leaders.

That's not all. In October 2015, a building called *La Morada* (The Residence) was opened in a working-class neighborhood of Madrid. This was the first node in a network of social and cultural centers directly managed by Podemos. The 460 square-meter space allowed the neighborhood's residents to come and have a drink at the bar, attend cultural events and photography exhibitions, settle down for a few hours in a co-working space or a room with Wi-Fi access, buy products in the official Podemos shop, attend public debates and film screenings and, finally, hold Podemos circle or local association meetings.

This model was duplicated in Bilbao, Barcelona, and other municipalities. The existence of such 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.

Indeed, the interactions in Podemos's circles and the activist work that they undertake differ — often strongly — from what traditionally happens in most parties' grassroots organizations. Their meetings and activities more closely resemble those of social-movement organizations rather than those of grassroots activists in institutionalized parties such as the PP and PSOE.

In concrete terms, Podemos circles' members dedicate more time to fighting against tenant evictions, protesting against racism, supporting strikes in public services, and organizing actions against the "touristification" of working-class neighborhoods in Barcelona and Madrid, than they devote to distributing pamphlets, sticking up posters, or organizing electoral campaigns.

These field observations are corroborated by an internal survey conducted in autumn 2016, showing that 84 percent of the 778 active Podemos circles participated in social movements with various different causes (feminism, environmentalism, migrants, access to education, to health, to energy) and means of action (strike, boycott, sit-in, protest, occupation).

In addition to these activities, Podemos’s movement-like dimension is also visible in the fact that its circles’ organizational practices — turn-taking, limitation of the length of interventions, gesture codes, moderation, feminization of vocabulary, etc. — are partly inherited from the 15M assemblies.

Each of the thirty-two members, activists, local administrators, and national leaders with whom I held a semi-structured interview during my research had actively participated in the 15M mobilizations (as against an estimated 20 percent of Spain’s adult population). This figure, certainly, concerns only a limited sample and would benefit from corroboration by more representative quantitative data. But, despite its crudeness, it does provide a valuable insight: Podemos largely recruits from within a pool of activists.

The existence of non-electoral activities (the circles, the protest, the social spaces) does not alone tell us that Podemos is anything other than a party. After all, interwar Communist parties and the pre-1914 German Social Democrats heavily based themselves on such activities.

The difference lies in the members’ own understanding of their organization. While the socialists and communists of yesteryear considered themselves members of a party — “the Party,” they said as if there was only one, an extension of “the family” — Podemos members think they belong to a “movement.” In an era which values the individual rather than the collective, the network rather than hierarchy and freedom rather than discipline, activists now prefer the name “movement” to that of “party.”

## Transformed From Within

Podemos can be described as an “antisystem” party in the sense that it does not share the political values of the system in which it has developed. In essence, Podemos contests the historical foundations of the current political regime, recalling time and again that the Spanish democratic transition rests on “the impunity of Francoist crimes,” on “the forgetting of antifascist memory,” and that

this transition ended up installing an "oligarchic" regime.

Podemos also contests this regime's historical foundations, to the point of making the "reform of the 1978 Constitution" one of the five principal points of its election manifesto. Indeed, Podemos challenges the legitimacy of the Spanish political class, which it considers "corrupt" and "incompetent." It accuses it of representing only itself and "submitting to the interests of the [European] Troika."

Podemos's antisystem character is also apparent in the rhetoric its activists frequently use to define its political project: "subverting the system from inside," "playing the political game in order to topple it," "entering into political institutions in order to turn them against themselves" and "creating a new party in order to go beyond the limits of traditional parties." Such phrases also reflect the constitutive paradox of Podemos activism: the desire to change the rules of the party-political field through integration into this world; the claim to represent politically a social movement founded on the critique of political representation.

Podemos activism is thus caught between a logic of integration into the institutional-political arena (Podemos in the role of political party) and a logic of contestation (Podemos in the role of social-movement organization).

These two logics are frequently found in parties situated on the far left of the political spectrum (even if Podemos itself refuses any such label). They were already apparent at the start of the twentieth century when the labor movement was institutionalized through the creation of socialist and communist parties, and also in the 1980s when the rise of the environmentalist movement resulted in the creation of green parties.

In Podemos's case, radical and forceful denunciation of the political regime and its main actors thus coexists with participation in electoral competition with the supposed aim of winning state power.

Here lies the root of the tension Podemos faces. In order to govern, Podemos must attract as broad an electorate as possible, which requires it to moderate its political program, cultivate a respectable image in order to credibly lay claim to state power, and make certain political agreements that will provide reassurances about its ability to govern.

It is not possible to take all these measures without tensions appearing within a party that claims allegiance to the *Indignados*, to social contestation, and which publicly opposes the values of the regime within which it has developed. By committing to the path of normalization, Podemos thus runs the risk of blurring its contestatory identity, of losing its legibility among its voters and sympathizers,

and of pushing away those of its activists who are most attached to its radical identity. Conversely, by cultivating its subversive profile, Podemos risks becoming less clear in its intentions.

## Protest Versus Power?

The question of Podemos’s “party” and/or “movement” identity is also shaped by the actual level of mobilization from below. While the 2008–2012 period was characterized by a clear rise in social conflict (the number of strikes and demonstrations), the following years (2012–2016), were characterized by decline. The ebbs and flows of such mobilization have sparked an important debate among sociologists as well as among activists: Is Podemos the cause *or* the consequence of the decline in social conflict?

In other words: is it just that institutionalization is weakening mobilization from below (by taking away key activists, who are converted into party full-timers or state officials, or by emphasizing other rhetorical focuses) or is there a separate process of demobilization at the grassroots level after the highs of 15M and the worst of the social crisis ... in turn driving Podemos leaders toward more classically social-democratic, state-level political action, as seen in negotiations with PSOE ?

Nuance is required, here. When we look at the indicators, the highest level of mobilization is reached in 2011. In 2012 and 2013, the mobilization from below had already started to decrease — that is, before Podemos was created. In 2014, Podemos’s founders knew that social conflict was decreasing — indeed, this was part of the reason why they decided to *extend* the fight into the electoral arena. However, this choice had the effect of accentuating the decline in social conflict during the period 2014–2016. From 2017, there was a strong return of street action — but it above all concerned the Catalan question.

Faced with this decline in mobilization, Podemos members are torn between the risks of marginalization and outright normalization. The strategies of demarcation and adaptation are antinomic. However, they are not mutually exclusive — after all, the “way of the ballot box” and the “way of the street” have coexisted since the party’s creation. These two strategies give rise to internal divisions that punctuate the life of the organization at regular intervals, in particular during national and local congresses.

At root, the main cleavage in Podemos from the outset was an opposition between the group of political scientists from the Complutense (and then *La Tuerka*) and the far-left Izquierda Anticapitalista (IA, founded in 2008). These two groups joined forces in January 2014 to launch Podemos, but they publicly confronted each other in internal elections at its founding congress (October 2014), then in July 2015 (over the selection of Podemos's candidates for the December 2015 general election), and again at Podemos Madrid's second citizen assembly in December 2017.

On each occasion, the debates were decided by open primaries in which any Spanish citizen could vote after registering for free online. Looking at the case of France's Parti Socialiste, F mi Lefebvre has shown 1) that primaries give predominant weight to supporters to the detriment of activists, 2) that under cover of democratization, primaries tend to reinforce the power of national leaders, and 3) primaries are a weapon in internal party struggles.

Despite contextual differences, these points seem valid for Podemos, too. Indeed, primaries were imposed by the Complutense team against the wishes of Izquierda Anticapitalista, which wanted to restrict the vote to activists — and most surveys show that non-activist supporters vote more for Iglesias's team than do activists. For the Complutense leaders, the open primaries would allow the bypassing of local circles — a significant proportion of which are more sympathetic to IA's line than Iglesias's.

However, those parts of Podemos that are most involved in social movements cannot be reduced to a passive minority serving as an oppositional "caution" to Iglesias. After all, they have led the party in major regions like Arag n (until Regional Secretary Pablo Echenique joined Iglesias's team in 2016) and Andaluc a, and are strongly embedded in cities like Madrid, Malaga, C diz, and Pamplona.

In one January 2015 speech, Carolina Bescansa — at that time number 3 in the Complutense team — claimed, as an attack on her IA counterparts, that there existed "a Podemos for winning, governing and motivating political change in our country, and another Podemos for protesting." After having given her complete support to the "Podemos for winning", Bescansa added nonetheless that "both [Podemoses] are legitimate" and that the second, "more oriented towards the sphere of protest" has "a lot to give."

A sociologist by profession, Bescansa's comments were directed toward an internal struggle over the election of Podemos Madrid's general secretary, in which she supported Luis Alegre over the IA-backed Miguel Urb n. This latter responded to this attack the next day: "it is by protesting that we won Madrid" and

“my allegiance is to the Podemos of protest — to that which is capable of winning.” Despite their opposition, the rivals thus agree that Podemos must uphold both goals at the same time: efficacy and radicalism, elections and contestation, the ballot boxes and the street.

## Toward Normalization?

These alignments did not, however, hold. While it was decisive during the first two years of Podemos’s existence (2014–15), the cleavage between the Complutense team and the members of Izquierda Anticapitalista gradually became overshadowed by the divide within the Complutense group, between the pro-Iglesias “Pablistas” and the “Errejónistas” — a split that reached its nadir during Podemos’ second citizen assembly in February 2017. Occasional local alliances between Pablistas and anticapitalists, as well as their shared desire to hold firm in the 2016 coalition negotiations with the PSOE, also complicated the initial cleavage. Yet IA activists retain a singular position within the party, due to their concentration in certain circles and their strong propensity to get involved in social movements.

To the extent that Podemos operates both *in* and *against* the institutional game — acting both as a political party (aiming to gain state power) and as a social movement (seeking to contest power) — we can describe this activist organization as a *party-movement*. But this observation ought not be taken as sacrosanct.

While in 2014 Podemos presented itself as a movement and rejected the label “party” — in a period of rapid expansion in which up to 1,500 active circles were formed nationwide and spontaneously adopted a self-organizing model — this effervescence petered out during the series of electoral campaigns (municipal, regional, general) that took place in 2015. The number of circles declined, and their informality was jeopardized by a procedure via which official authorities “validated” the existence of grassroots circles (a way to recognize their legitimacy and say that they really “represent” Podemos), as well as by a loss of power among these circles.

Nonetheless, this normalization of Podemos was halted in 2016 with the creation of new circles and a renewed enthusiasm among activists. In spring 2016, the appointment as Podemos secretary of Pablo Echenique (considered close to the party’s grassroots) was welcomed by most activists. On October 31, the investiture



of right-winger Mariano Rajoy as prime minister moreover brought an end to Podemos’s hopes of coalition with PSOE. Confined to an opposition role, the party began to rediscover the movementist impulses that animated it at its foundation.

This situation changed again on June 1 2018, as Rajoy’s government fell in a vote of no confidence passed jointly by Podemos and the PSOE, following a corruption scandal. The next day, PSOE general secretary Pedro Sánchez was installed as prime minister. Sánchez’s party had a minority in Parliament and was forced to seek an alliance in order to govern and pass its budget — a pact he formed with Podemos. This change at the highest level of the state reoriented Podemos once again towards institutionalization. Its partisan dimension gained the upper hand over its movementist dimension. This didn’t entail the suppression of the circles’ influence, since the demands Podemos’ direction advanced in negotiations with Sanchez were approved by the Podemos members via an internal and online referendum. But a difficulty arises here: while the notion of “party-movement” is a scholarly category available to the sociologist, it is also a practical category explicitly mobilized by the actors in interparty competition.

## The “Party-Movement” Label

“When was the last time you voted with hope?” Podemos’s campaign slogan in the 2014 European elections provided a good summary of its strategy: to incite enthusiasm in a country hit by social and economic crisis. Indeed, between 2007 and 2012 the unemployment level had risen from 7 to 25 percent and public debt had soared from 36 to 100 percent of GDP, amidst gradually rising electoral abstention.

This work of reviving public life centered less on the promotion of little-known leaders than on the use of a renewed political vocabulary, some of which sparked much commentary. Notable were Podemos’s abandonment of references to “the working classes” and even to the “Left” in favor of an appeal to the “people” (against “*la casta*” and “the elites”), to “citizens” (against “the oligarchy”) and to “the homeland” (against the politicians and bankers who “betray” it).

This de-ideologization (or at least, loss of references to Marxism and the working class) undertaken by a section of leaders close to Íñigo Errejón — is in many ways reminiscent of how certain “catch-all” parties in the 1960s diluted their ideological basis in order to expand their electoral base.

But another little-remarked-upon linguistic factor seems at least as decisive — namely, the use of the expression “party-movement.” This term is a valuable symbolic resource, allowing Podemos to distinguish itself from other parties. While political parties and social movements are generally conceived of as distinct and even incompatible entities, their juxtaposition allows an emphasis on Podemos’s hybrid nature, showing that it sits at the crossroads between the street and the ballot box, between contestation and institutionalization.

This discursive staging of the tension within Podemos produces the image of a “pluralist,” “open,” and “uncertain” party, which can thereby be distinguished from parties that are “monolithic,” “dogmatic,” and “puffed up with certainties” such as the PP and the PSOE.

In June 2016’s general elections, Podemos joined forces with its rival of communist descent, Izquierda Unida (IU) in order to form the Unidos Podemos list. Up till this point, Podemos had kept its distance from IU. If Spanish journalists often remarked that Podemos’s political and economic program was almost identical to IU’s own, Podemos representatives denied this similarity, in particular by emphasizing Podemos’s innovative organizational form.

It was at this point that the expression “party-movement” began to appear. This allowed Podemos activists to claim that it was not *quite* a party. As Pablo Iglesias put it in a short bestselling book,

While Podemos has established itself as a party, this is for legal reasons, to be able to participate in elections, even if, fundamentally, *we remain a movement*, a ‘movement of movements’ as we like to say. The Podemos *circles* — these citizen assemblies that have emerged and continue to emerge spontaneously across the country in villages, neighborhoods, cities — are informal grassroots assemblies, without leaders or subscriptions, involving from two to three hundred people. These are spaces for putting an end to fear, fragmentation, resignation. Their role was crucial in our success during the European elections of May 25, 2014. They have been the link between the people and the *movement-party* that is Podemos. Today, they number more than a thousand, distributed over the whole of Spain, but also outside of Spain.

The 2016 alliance with Izquierda Unida, renewed at subsequent elections, constituted a major strategic turn in Podemos’s (short) history. It was also accompanied by a semantic turn, with the expression “party-movement” making

increasingly rare appearances (without altogether disappearing) in Podemos leaders' language. This expression is, however, still frequently used by the circles' members.

What function does this expression fulfill? We have already noted that it allows Podemos's members to avoid the label "party," strongly disparaged in the Spanish imaginary since it evokes "archaic" and "corrupt" organizations "cut off from ordinary people." The word "party" automatically brings to mind the two forces that have shared power on an alternating basis since the democratic transition: the so-called PPSOE (a contraction uniting the PP and PSOE, just as France's Front National denounced the center-right UMP and center-left PS as a single "UMPS.")

Attaching the term "movement" to the term "party" casts off such partisan stigma, enabling Podemos to be presented as "the party of the *Indignados*" and thus to claim for itself the public support that this movement enjoyed, and still enjoys: in 2014 more than 70 percent of Spanish people said they agreed with its message and demands. The expression "party-movement" thus constitutes a symbolic resource whose purpose is to show the electorate that Podemos is not a party like the others and is the only force capable of "converting social indignation into political change."

## Staging Tension

Beyond using the term "party-movement" as a symbolic resource, Podemos members may stage the tension within their organization in order to promote it. Activists can thus narrativize their dilemmas in order to present the image of an organization gripped by doubt and self-critique — thus distinguishing Podemos from its rivals, who are disparaged for their inability to challenge their old habits.

Since Podemos's representatives want to seduce and recruit a reserve of those disillusioned by party activism and waiting for a new, more open organization, they have an interest in making the internal struggles that cut across their organization public. While sociologists of collective action generally emphasize leaders' work to unify and construct a homogenous public image, Podemos instead illustrates how much a group might gain from allowing its divisions to be broadcast. But while they might sometimes prove politically beneficial, these divisions always risk corroding the party's image, affecting its own members, even

leading to their departure, as in November 2017, when Podemos was split over the question of Catalan independence.

The strategic use of the label "party-movement" does not mean that Podemos has undertaken a complete devaluation of the label "party." Rather, it seems that Podemos's representatives are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they need to rehabilitate the description "party" in order to distinguish themselves from activists hostile to electoral participation who thus remain "prisoners" of an "inoffensive," "powerless," "purist," and "anarchist" posture. On the other, they balk at presenting themselves as a "party" because they use this very word to disparage the PP and PSOE as the same, mere accomplices of the system.

Staging this tension allows Podemos's members to present the image of a pluralist party more attractive than its rivals. Yet, at the same time, these rivals have learned to seize on the public disagreements between Podemos' different elements, denouncing its lack of credibility and emphasizing that its voters cannot seriously entrust the reins of government to an organization whose members are incapable of agreeing on fundamental issues.

Even so, we should clarify that the expression "party-movement" does not just serve to distinguish Podemos from rival parties. It is also mobilized in Podemos's internal struggles. While Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón all but stopped using this phrase from 2016 onwards, it is still used by *Anticapitalistas* leaders.

In an interview given to the *El Diario* newspaper in January 2018, on Podemos's fourth birthday, Miguel Urbán assessed the situation as follows: "It is absolutely necessary to recover that impulse of popular overflowing that was at Podemos's origin and that surprised its founders, to return to the concrete struggles of ordinary people, we need a party-movement, we need to reinvent Podemos so that it doesn't convert itself into yet another party but rather into a tool of the popular classes with which they can change their lives, change everything."

Two and a half years earlier, in an official party memo about the general elections dated October 31, 2015, Anticapitalistas had already criticized the party's Pablista management, which it reproached for a lack of desire "to embed itself in the working class in order to construct a party-movement that both feeds off and feeds social conflict." This repeated recourse to the expression "party-movement" allows the most contestatory tendency within Podemos to issue a warning to rival factions, who might be tempted by an exclusively institutional and electoral definition of this collective tool.

# Mouffe and Laclau

That Podemos has institutionalized seems obvious. Everything indicates as much — its members acknowledge this readily. But the important question lies elsewhere. It is whether Pablo Iglesias’ party is, in 2020, a party “like the others.” This does not seem to be the case — rather, it continues to be what Herbert Kitschelt calls a “party-movement.”

In a 2014 interview in which Iglesias distinguished Podemos from the “old politics” of the “corrupt” and “incompetent” parties, he insisted that it was not a party, but a “movement of movements.” This distinction gradually disappeared from his speeches, but it does occasionally resurface in Podemos discourse.

Indeed, my discussions with activists from different circles show that the institutional versus extra-institutional tension also exists within individuals, who fear betraying their contestatory logic by adapting to institutions — a tension familiar already to the People’s Party in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, as it sought to disrupt the Democrats and Republicans.

Looking at this tension in Podemos’s identity, it may be useful to conclude with a few words about left populism. Chantal Mouffe (as well as Ernesto Laclau) is regularly cited by commentators seeking to explain Podemos’s functioning. It is true that Pablo Iglesias and Iñigo Errejón closely studied their theories during their PhD research. But it is erroneous to believe that the ideas of a philosopher could suffice to explain a party’s concrete functioning.

Indeed, when I was in Barcelona in 2006–8, these concepts of hegemony, radical democracy, and populism were completely absent among activists in Spain. Ten years later, this vocabulary is widely used in Podemos circles and more broadly among activists. The lexical field of left populism — in particular the term “hegemony” — has thus been democratized and spread, perhaps leading us to think that this philosophy might exercise some influence on activists’ actions.

But the same word can take on several meanings, depending on the person and the context in which it is used. Speaking about “hegemony” in the Italy of the 1920s, as Antonio Gramsci did, is not exactly the same as doing so in Spain in the 2010s.

For Gramsci, the notion of hegemony served to indicate that beyond the economic struggle, there is a cultural or political struggle. He sought to explain why the revolution foreseen by Marxists in Europe did not take place, replying that Marxists focused on relations of production — the economic situation — had

neglected the political dimension. There is an autonomy of the political: the bourgeoisie does not dominate by force and coercion alone, but by fomenting consensus.

If we turn to Mouffe and Laclau’s most influential book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, we see two principal differences with Gramsci. First, hegemony is not necessarily linked to social class; on the contrary, hegemony is the mechanism that allows different social groups to be aggregated. Second, for Mouffe and Laclau — and this is what they call Gramsci’s essentialism — there is not a political subject that imposes its hegemony; it is rather within the struggle for hegemony that a political subject is constituted.

Today in Spain, when Pablo Iglesias speaks about hegemony, this seems to be saying something very different: that young people are not becoming politicized by listening to their parents, their teachers, or politicians, but rather through films and the media, and that it is there that one must act in order to achieve hegemony. When Podemos activists talk about hegemony, many of them understand this to mean that the political struggle is a semantic struggle — a struggle over the meaning of words.

## Playing the Game

The problem is, today the words Podemos uses have changed. As I write, it is preparing to join the Spanish government for the first time, in coalition with its former enemies in the PSOE. When we compare the forty-nine-page text of the coalition agreement, unveiled on December 30, 2019, to the program Podemos put forward at its first European election campaign in 2014, we can see how its ambitions have been lowered.

There is no longer any question of creating a public bank or a public energy company. The call to stop paying the public debt now gives way to “respect for the mechanisms of budgetary discipline” desired by the big companies of the IBEX35 and imposed by the European treaties. Catalonia’s right to self-determination has disappeared. Finally, on the emblematic question of home evictions, the Plataforma de los Afectados por la Hipotec — a campaign which provided Podemos many of its leaders and ideas — severely criticized the “progressive” government’s program, warning: “We are faced with a list of good intentions, which does not contemplate any concrete measures — running the risk of once

again giving a toast to the sun [i.e., empty playing to the gallery].”

One would be tempted to conclude that Podemos has definitively its cut ties with social movements. Yet the coalition program also promises to rapidly abolish the measures that Mariano Rajoy’s right-wing government used to criminalize social movements, limit freedom of assembly, and restrict freedom of expression.

It seems, then, that Podemos’s character has not been decided for certain, whatever the compromises imposed by the institutional game. In the coming months, we will have to look closely at the government’s interactions with social mobilizations to see if Podemos retains at least some of the spirit of protest that first drove its creation.

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