

# Constructing a new politics

Íñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe

## Introduction

The last half century has been witness to both the crumbling of the old standoff between East and West and the total failure on the part of both orthodox Marxism and European social democracy to adapt to changing circumstances, or present any challenge to the emergence of neoliberalism and its increasing hegemony. Now, however, a new wave of left initiatives has arisen within Europe that aims to do things differently. They include both movements and parties. Their aims include doing politics in a different way, as well as presenting a more radical challenge to neoliberalism; and they have some different theoretical and political reference points from those of past debates.

Podemos is an important element in this new radical challenge, and its recent electoral performance in Spain shows that it is not about to go away. *Podemos: In the Name of the People*, a new book by Íñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe, first published in Spanish, is a theoretically and politically engaged discussion of these developments. (The English translation will be published by Lawrence and Wishart in May 2016.) Íñigo Errejón is a political scientist and political secretary of Podemos. Elected as an MP in December 2015, he is the Podemos spokesperson in Congress. Chantal Mouffe is Professor of Political Theory at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster. She is the author of many books, including, as co-author with Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. A conversation between these two thus serves as an analysis of recent political developments in Spain, an introduction to the theoretical work of Mouffe and Laclau, and an examination of the coming together of ‘theory’ and ‘political practice’.

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The book as a whole ranges widely, exploring questions such as: How do we put together our thinking about populism, leadership and representation? How do we 'construct the people' by starting from the multifarious discontents of ordinary people, discontents that at first sight might seem to have little in common? How do we learn from progressive political experiments in other places? How do we go about defining political frontiers?

This article is a translation of just two sections of the book. The first, 'Consensus at the centre and right-wing populism', analyses a phenomenon recognisable in much of Europe (UKIP, *Front National*, Golden Dawn), and stresses the need for a shift away from the centre in an equivalent act of boldness on the left. The second section, 'The 15 May movement and the emergence of Podemos', includes a searching analysis that has wider implications for the relations between social movements on the one hand and political parties on the other.

*Doreen Massey*

## **Consensus at the centre and right-wing populism**

**CM** Feeling that your vote could actually contribute to bringing about change is crucial. Believing that your vote will make a real difference - this is fundamental. This is interesting because the current post-political model of 'consensus at the centre' removes from politics one of its constitutive elements - its partisan nature. As I have often argued, in order to belong to an 'us' there needs to be a 'them', and what 'them' means in the field of democratic politics is an adversary. I think that in many countries one of the reasons that fewer and fewer people are interested in politics, and there are increasing levels of abstention, is that the difference between centre-right and centre-left is so miniscule that people feel that there is actually nothing at stake. Let me remind you of a staggering electoral episode. In the very first round of the 2002 French presidential elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen eliminated the Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin. I used to joke with my students that the difference between Jospin and Chirac was the same as that between Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Jospin - who, incidentally, is a very decent person - had the bad idea of proclaiming during the campaign against Chirac: 'I am not a socialist'. Thereafter, most of my friends told me that they would not vote for Jospin in the first round, only in the second. People

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did not get mobilised for Jospin because there was no passion involved. And so Le Pen got through to the second round, leaving the Socialists out in the cold.

**IE** This is because nothing of any substance was in dispute. The most important decisions are taken by unelected powers in a remote sphere that is far removed from any potential control by citizens. Meanwhile political representatives come to resemble each other more and more, and their constituents less and less. In the absence of any contestation over ideas and projects, democracy languishes and resignation spreads; and disaffection also breeds, as the crisis of representation deepens and institutions are increasingly under the sway of powerful minorities.

**CM** That is precisely what is needed in politics: something substantial has to be at stake, with citizens having a choice between clearly different projects.

**IE** In my opinion, with this 'post-political' narrowing of democracy, the majority of decisions - and the most crucial ones - are being taken in places that are out of the reach of popular sovereignty. And what is then left for popular sovereignty is merely to choose between variations on the same consensus, not to decide between alternatives. That cannot make a real difference to the lives of citizens! And it is certainly unlikely to galvanise any kind of passion. It is unsurprising, in these circumstances, that people abandon politics to the 'experts' or leave it at the mercy of the intricate machinations of elites.

**CM** I agree. This is why in many countries people are not interested in politics. And the development of right-wing populism is one of the consequences of this. It has to be acknowledged that right-wing populists, as is currently the case with Marine Le Pen in France, have a much better grasp of the nature of the political struggle than progressives. For instance, they understand the formation of collective identities, and recognise that politics consists in building an 'us'. Right-wing populists also understand the role of collective emotions - what I call the passions - in the construction of an 'us', as well as the importance of symbols and the need to offer an alternative. Obviously, the alternative they offer is not only illusory but also completely unacceptable to progressives. But the problem is that parties on the left tend to believe that the only response is to appeal to reason. Trying to awaken

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passions is something that the fascist right does.

**ÍE** That happens a lot in Spain, particularly among liberals who call themselves 'progressive'. They see every collective passion as carrying within itself the germ of totalitarianism. But this position means renouncing any form of collective ideal; and, when coupled with the assumption that we are in a sort of timelessness, at the end of history, it represents the abandonment of any possibility of tackling injustice. For these kinds of liberals, any attempt to mobilise passions through forms of emotional identification is potentially totalitarian - for them our mature, or contemporary, freedoms are the freedoms of solitary individuals who make decisions dispassionately, and preferably not in the streets, but from the comfort of their own sofas. Liberals of this kind have been horrified at the emphasis by Podemos on reclaiming emotion for politics and regaining the joy of sharing collective forms of identification.

What you say about reactionary forms of populism or right-wing populism is very interesting - not only in terms of the phenomenon itself, but for what it reveals about current developments, and the possibilities that they open up in our societies, including questions about who will occupy that space if it is not occupied by democratic forces. Reactionary populism has been able to recuperate the powerful idea of 'community' - that we must build a spirit of community at a time when there is more insecurity, more anxiety and fear, more uncertainty about tomorrow. They have been able to reconstruct the idea of community as a powerful and 'efficient idea' - one that liberal-conservatives have been too quick to discard as fantasy.

**CM** And it wasn't difficult for them to reclaim that ideal of community, given that the theorists of the Third Way were proclaiming that collective identities had become obsolete and that we had finally entered the era of individualism.

**ÍE** Then there is the issue of politically incorrect speech. A bold anti-establishment discourse that unhesitatingly challenges the vocabularies and ways of thinking of the elite, and willingly accepts the possibility of being attacked for this, is crucial in times when traditional loyalties are breaking down. Audacity is crucial, even if it involves accepting that the adversary may hit you back all the harder. And if the democratic and progressive forces do not adopt a bold stance, we can be sure that the extreme right will do so.

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For our part, Podemos was born fighting (with humility but also with determination) a certain timidity that we perceived within the existing left, which seemed to have forgotten that it takes courage to fight for democracy and rights - to restore respect for the underdog - and this may well require taking sides, and losing the sympathy of the privileged, even forfeiting their pats on the back. When a measure is unjust, we must dare to name it as such and challenge it. That is what we have done, and we are paying for it. The reaction of all the usual defenders of the status quo has been fierce. Perhaps the difference between the diverse ways of building popular identities is essentially this: who is the adversary, who do you oppose?

**CM** Anti-establishment discourse can be articulated in different ways, and that is why it is very important not to leave it to the forces of the right. In the case of Greece it is clear that if Syriza had not existed, the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn would by now have been getting better results.

**ÍE** Yes, and this raises the question of how to combat right-wing populism. There is a widespread but clearly mistaken notion among leftist forces that if we similarly adopt a 'popular' approach we could be paving the way for their ideas. On the contrary, I think it helps them much more if we abandon all forms of collective emotion, and thus cede this space to them. Another serious mistake is to relinquish to them the battle for hegemony in the sphere of national identification. It is a mistake to hand over to the most reactionary forces the opportunity to put forward, uncontested, their own view of what the country stands for - their project for a strong country will in reality be built against the weak, against outsiders, against national minorities, or simply be based on chauvinism. They will not be trying to rebuild a civic, popular and democratic idea of the country, one that is supportive and inclusive, and endowed with solid institutions and democratic safeguards - in other words a democratic, progressive and popular patriotism.

**CM** I find it a real problem that the left largely has a very negative attitude towards the very idea of patriotism, as if patriotism could only manifest itself in reactionary ways.

**ÍE** The struggle for hegemony, for national identification, is key. And another important point is to try to understand how the far right, which is not classist - that

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is to say, does not base its policy on social classes - has managed to engage with a diverse and wider array of sectors, and, potentially, to build broader national-popular blocks.

**CM** They are the true Gramscians!

**ÍE** Right-wing Gramscians.

**CM** Yes, absolutely. Unfortunately they have understood Gramsci better than most sectors of the left. I remember when - before writing *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* - I published my first article on Gramsci, in which I tried to defend a non-economistic reading of his concept of hegemony, and my interpretation was criticised by Marxists like Perry Anderson. It so happened that at that time we were both in Caracas, holding seminars at the CENDES in Venezuela, and we were both talking about Gramsci. The students were quite perplexed because we were proposing divergent readings. At the same time in France the 'New Right' - an intellectual group directed by Alain Benoist - was organising a symposium to promote a 'right-wing Gramscianism', insisting on the importance of the struggle for hegemony. The left, meanwhile, could not understand the nature of this struggle for hegemony, because they interpreted it in terms of the imposition of the dominant ideology. And I am concerned that Gramsci's contribution has still not been really assimilated by the left.

### **The 15 May movement and the emergence of Podemos**

**ÍE** To understand why reactionary populism has not gained much of a grip in Spain we need to look closely at the appearance here of two 'democratic vaccines': on the one hand, the role of the 15 May movement (known in Spain as 15M), and on the other the emergence of Podemos. I think that 15M served as a vaccine that prevented discontent from taking a reactionary form, and instead helped to articulate a collective demand for a broadening of rights and an expansion of democracy - for more universality of rights and more democracy, instead of more restrictions and less democracy. 15M did not change the balance of forces within the state, but it did nevertheless successfully help sow the seeds of a cultural shift.

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**CM** I have my reservations regarding this point. To some extent I agree with you. However, I believe that 15M would have come to nothing without Podemos, which finally managed to capitalise on all that energy. Without Podemos, might there have developed a dangerous form of scepticism and cynicism that could have shifted things in a reactionary direction? I think that could have been the case. That is the reason why it's very important to channel these protest movements in a direction that seeks to engage with existing institutions in order to transform them. The explosion of protests is a first step, but without a second moment of channelling a movement can acquire a direction other than progressive.

**ÍE** Yes, absolutely. Here there are several issues worth commenting on. 15M could be seen as a sort of horizontal expansion of discontent. On the one hand, many people were driven to gather together by a radical opposition to the status quo, but, on the other, this position helped to *politicise* certain issues that were previously seen as private grievances. If you've had to leave your country to find work, or you're stuck at home with your parents, or have to hold down several jobs to make ends meet, or you feel that the privileged elite will always have the upper hand and be in government no matter how you vote ... these are not private problems, they are immediately inscribed in the public sphere.

There was a very significant moment in the protests in *Puerta del Sol* when many people affixed post-it notes written in the first person, notes telling about their particular individual situation. That was an initial moment that Gramsci would call 'economic-corporate'. It was people saying: I have this or that problem. But the sharing of these problems helped establish them as problems of the public agenda: they could no longer be ignored. This democratised the public agenda and prevented the usual split between the official-institutional agenda and the concerns of ordinary people with less ability to influence the institutions. And this in turn put the elites on the defensive. The elites aged quickly after 15M; and although they continued to govern, 15M had an overriding impact on the common sense of the time. It did not transform anything, it did not constitute political actors capable of leading a war of position within the state, but it definitely created a climate, a state of perceptions, that opened the possibility for political change. So whenever we are questioned about the relationship between Podemos and 15M - and abroad we are constantly asked this question - we say that Podemos is not the party of 15M.

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**CM** I think it is important that you clarify this issue because for many people the relationship between Podemos and 15M is unclear. Can you explain?

**ÍE** We are not the party of 15M - mainly because any party that claimed to be the party of 15M would be a fraud. It is impossible to have a 'party of 15M', given that it is a heterogeneous movement, a phenomenon which expands horizontally by putting together very different grievances and discontents, some with very weak links with each other, articulated only by their common opposition to power. So 15M neither has nor can have a party - yet not because it would not be desirable ...

**CM** What is more, they did not want to have a relationship with political parties.

**ÍE** Some of them didn't. I would say that by shouting 'they do not represent us' 15M participants wanted to express a crisis of political representation *tout-court*, but events after 15M demonstrate that, for most of the people coming out to protest, or just to show their sympathy, this did not imply a rejection of all forms of representation. They were not saying that they did not want to be represented. They were, rather, throwing down a challenge to the elites who at present monopolise representation. It may seem a paradox, but in fact, as with many other movements that actually sow the seeds of change in history, 15M was born as a 'conservative' reaction: citizens coming out to protest against losing already acquired or promised rights, demanding that the elite is not placed above the law, and that the established framework for coexistence is respected. This is why we say that, in an exceptional time like this, as a result of the brazen offensive of the oligarchy, ideas of change are by now well anchored in common sense, because the elites have gone so far. That suggests unprecedented political possibilities.

That's why Podemos is not the expression or the electoral translation of 15M. First, because there cannot be one; and secondly because the project of Podemos was launched without any previous consultation between movements, or between assemblies, or among the indignados. It is an initiative of activists and citizens who have resolved that there is scope to convert a portion ...

**CM** Of course, it would not have been possible if they had decided to discuss the



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initiative with all movements.

ÍE Obviously. If we had subjected the project to discussion of that sort it would never have been born. At this point we need to remember how infrequent self-criticism is in Spain: most sections of the movement, political parties, all the forces that called themselves the left - everyone - agreed that the project made no sense at all and that it would be a failure. Some of them even put it plainly in writing. If the idea had undergone a process of assembly-based discussion, it would never have come to anything. But maybe the difference between giving your opinion and acting as a militant lies in taking the risk of putting your hypothesis to the test.

We are still living a paradoxical situation in which you need to do the opposite of what some sectors of activists recommend in order to secure new arrangements and to achieve broad popular recognition.

The electoral campaign conducted by Podemos consisted of doing, step by step, precisely the opposite of what would be recommended by the most militant groups. Everyone predicted that it would go totally wrong. The truth is, however, that we have experienced such a massive transformation that the old certainties that are seen as stable and unquestionable amongst the ghettos of radical militancy have now been revealed for what they are: a form of consensus that removes the possibility of change, or any opportunity to make a successful challenge to majority groups and turn outrage into power. For all their diversity, these groups inhabit precisely the discursive spaces that are left to them by the establishment, and they are, essentially, satisfied with a tradeoff between 'purity' and marginality.

The closer you get to that ghetto consensus, the further away you go from the possibility of a new consensus with a number of popular sectors that are clearly unhappy but nonetheless without political reference points.

All of the aforementioned allows us to say that Podemos does not spring out of 15M. It is not its political or electoral expression. In addition, a good portion of the discontent was not part of 15M, although it sympathised with it, certainly. Yet I must say that without the movement of 15M, and without the small changes in common sense that followed, the window of opportunity that opened for something like Podemos to come into existence would have not occurred. In that moment, when, although 70 to 80 per cent of Spaniards were sympathetic to what you would

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identify as the main motives or claims of 15M, the right-wing Popular Party still obtained an absolute majority in the ensuing elections.

The key to what happened is not how many people went out to protest or how many meetings and assemblies flourished, though admittedly the numbers were very impressive, with all the logistics that were involved and the demonstrative aspect. The key is the subterranean, magmatic change, thanks to which the cultural climate changes, in a manner that means that issues that were not politicised before are today felt as increasingly intolerable, and thus presented to the rulers as such. Moreover, there is the growing perception that a political cycle is running out, and as it comes to an end another one must open. These adjustments to the common sense of the time are precisely what allow people to imagine the building of an exceptional political intervention.

That was the moment when we came to believe that a different majority was possible, a transversal one, as well as a consensus around a number of ideas that were already common sense but actually ran across the Spanish political spectrum: this is the reason for the claim that Podemos cannot be described in terms of left or right. It is not at all a renunciation of ideology, because, as you know, ideologies are expressed - and have been expressed in most of the planet for most of history - in different metaphors, on the left and right alike. And it is not a marketing operation that window-dresses the essence of things with different outfits to get the vote, not at all; the crux of the matter is that the frontier drawn by the new democratic majority cannot be described in terms of the usual left-right wording. This wording has fuelled the Spanish political regime for the last thirty years whilst keeping safe the interests of the privileged at the expense of the majority of the people.

**CM** Going back to a previous question: what is the misperception on the part of all these political activists that explains their failure to understand the importance of the institutional dimension? In the case of liberalism, as we discussed before, they do not recognise the importance of collective movements; neither do they recognise antagonism. Clearly, there is no surprise here: they cannot understand politics. But in the case of activists in these movements, what is preventing them from making a proper analysis of the situation?

**ÍE** For a certain sector identified with the theories of the *multitude*, a minority that was

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nevertheless intellectually influential, 15M was the beginning of a victory. A victory that would perhaps take some time. They kept on saying that institutions were just zombies, that they were no more than the walking dead. But some of us replied: 'For zombies they are surprisingly lively, privatising and evicting like mad ...'.

Let us say that theirs was an overly optimistic view: 'we are winning'. Besides, this view was indebted to a very *Zapatista* vision, or *neo-Zapatista*, according to which 'we go slowly because the road is long'; or, for instance, 'we are making changes at the micro level, molecular changes that are perhaps not as visible as the institutional changes you propose but are the true passport to a new world'; in this view also, 'this is a slower process, transforming everyday life' ... in summary, everything under this approach is always an apology for the *micro* and an apology for *procedure*. Thus, for them we are already winning, given that any attempt to transform this potentiality into an effective political impact on the state would give the state the ability to recapture it or to integrate it; and that would be a mistake because it would decapitate the 'truly democratic potentiality' of the movement.

Let me clarify my position. Many of the activists who subscribe to the views I have just described have undoubtedly invested a lot of energy and creativity into their movement, but from my point of view their perception of things is mistaken.

It seems to me that they are replacing the *why* with the *how*: because we are not always sure what the target is, we have discussions about procedures, and evade some of the difficult questions, such as the construction of a will to power or the question of the state.

**CM** That is the view of the protest movements and, as you see, the problem of part of the radical left.

**IE** For much of the more traditional left, 15M is an expression of downright naivety; and, for the most mistaken among them, it is something even worse, perhaps having been nurtured within the murky corridors of power. According to this section of the left, nothing changes after 15M; it does not represent a cultural shift and is a profound mistake, because it is nowhere to be found in the handbook: the protesters are not dressed in blue overalls, they do not carry hammers, and so on and so forth; in summary, for these parts of the traditional left 15M is useless.

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Then there is another perspective, a religious and aesthetic position that, although it is not very sophisticated in theoretical terms, I think is right. Put briefly, it says that daring to win involves getting contaminated - living with contradictions and accepting small victories - because in the struggle you win some and negotiate the rest. That is to say, you push forward and you get your hands dirty. You have to roll up your sleeves and get involved in the messiness of reality, and this is definitely less comfortable than the 'purity' of defeat.

Moreover, some of the more radical sectors seem to be enamoured of defeat. This romantic infatuation explains, for example, why a Latin American president who transforms the lives of his people is less attractive than, let us say, Salvador Allende, who was killed in the Palacio de la Moneda; and I say this with the utmost respect for Allende and the experience of Popular Unity in Chile. But on this view a slain hero is the greater hero ... a slain hero is fantastic because he hasn't had the opportunity to get contaminated by reality. Pure as an angel he dies, with his horn-rimmed glasses and European look, a doctor ... and he becomes an icon. That kind of infatuation is a form of maximalism, a refusal to take a gamble and dare to win, with all the unavoidable complications that entails.

Then there is the question, as we noted above, of the state. If you understand the state as a machine rather than as a field of forces (a machine that can be besieged or destroyed, or from which you can escape), it can only be accepted or rejected as a totality. This prevents an understanding of the state as a terrain for struggle, a place within which there is a balance of forces - an always unstable balance, an ever-moving 'equilibrium'; it stops you from seeing the state - though it is fortified by existing institutions - as also battlefield in a struggle that, especially when the weather is stormy for the establishment, always remains unresolved.

**CM** I agree with you. The question of the state is fundamental. On the one side are those who see it as a neutral institution that requires no modification. On the other there are those who see it as a pure form of domination that needs to be destroyed. Yet few people actually realise that the state is a site of contestation with which we must engage deeply in order to transform it at the service of the popular forces. This lack of understanding of the nature of the state is the origin of many of the mistakes of the left in its various forms.

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ÍE The refusal to understand the state also implies a refusal to understand questions of representation and leadership. For such a stance or theory these are just one-way phenomena; representation is not for them a negotiation between the represented and their representatives, but instead an almost 'magical' transfer.

From the same standpoint, leadership is not a relationship of 'listening-proposing-listening', that is to say, a relationship in which, in order to represent interests, you must also interpret what is emerging from below. No. For leaders of that type, 'below' does not exist, and 'leadership' is just an impersonation of sovereignty. We have to acknowledge that we come from a tradition of thirty years of cultural and intellectual defeat for the left. The theoretical and intellectual resources that we draw on in our discussions were, and still are, very weak. We don't have many reference points for our thinking, or much practical experience that could rejuvenate theory and debate. For several decades we haven't experienced a time like these 'weeks of real movement' that have taught us more than ten treatises put together!

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