

Podemos, Sumar and the return of Eurocommunism: the real, the radical and the populist left

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Is it possible to create a majoritarian left without
lapsing into reformism?

In 2010, when he was 95, former Spanish Communist Party (PCE) leader Santiago Carrillo was asked in an interview how he would define himself politically. His answer was short and concise: 'I am Eurocommunist'.¹ Apparently, Carrillo thought that Eurocommunism was as relevant then as it had been when it had emerged, and he still found it to be the most accurate word to depict his political project. Carrillo also believed that it was still possible to create a new political party to the left of the Spanish Social Democratic Party (PSOE). Two years earlier, PSOE President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero had developed the idea of rebuilding the centre left after the experiments of the Third Way, and had managed to pass measures in the Spanish Parliament to activate the economy along these lines, including with an austerity plan. In 2010, Carrillo considered the PCE to be old-fashioned, anchored in a critique of capitalism from a century ago, and unable to fill the space of the left. He also believed that the United Left (IU), a left coalition in

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which the PCE played a major role, would prove to be too weak to lead a project for the left due to its multiple internal crises.

This assessment was made one year before the massive mobilisations for ‘real democracy’ by the *indignados* movements in the squares, and three years before the foundation of Podemos, a new party of the left led by Pablo Iglesias. Iglesias was certain that only a new party could respond to the demands of contemporary Spanish society, and that he could lead the new party to expand the political space of the left. In principle, Carrillo’s diagnosis might therefore seem to have been visionary: a new party did indeed emerge to dispute a space formerly occupied by the centre left and the left. However, a party that would recover the legacy of the best of communism, in Carrillo’s terms, namely Eurocommunism, did not materialise. Within IU there was a further strengthening of the political line opposed to Carrillo’s ideas and fraction, while Podemos positioned itself as an alternative to, and critic of, the parties that had been involved in the Spanish Transition to democracy (after the death of Franco in 1975), including the PCE, then led by Carrillo.

The legacy of Eurocommunism is, at the least, paradoxical. Although few voices from the left claim its validity and relevance for a left project nowadays, references to Eurocommunism, not only in Spain but in Europe in general, return again and again to account for proposed reforms, and internal struggles, within the left. Mass media also utilise the framework of Eurocommunism when a ‘new left’ emerges, or a fraction conflicts with the ‘official’ line within a given party, or within the left more generally. Within the political space of the non-social-democratic left, new Eurocommunist tendencies are often perceived as a threat that will transform the party into a centre-left or socio-liberal one. I therefore think it is important to look again at some of the questions that Eurocommunism brought into the political debate in the 1970s, as well as the way in which they have been reproduced by the left in Spain since then, particularly in recent years. I believe that focusing on the (re)emergence of Eurocommunism into left debates can be useful for understanding the contemporary potential for, as well as constraints on, the left - in its attempts to develop a stable narrative (by strengthening its sense of continuity), and in its understanding of the relationship between political leaders and political projects. In my opinion, the approach adopted by the left in Spain in the face of the specific political conjunctures in which it has sought to intervene

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is a reflection of the difficulties of shaping a political space to the left of social democracy. Eurocommunism as a preliminary attempt to re-assess the positions of the left during the transition to liberal democracy returned after 2010, at a time when several fractions and political leaderships were competing to define the way to develop left politics.

Gramsci: Hegemony in times of liberal democracy

Before addressing the emergence of Eurocommunism in the debates and confrontations of the parties of the Spanish Left, I consider it relevant to highlight how the thought of Gramsci became crucial in giving a theoretical basis to the Eurocommunist project, and his later revival with the foundation of Podemos.

Eurocommunism entails the creation of a third way - for many an unexciting political space - between the left represented by the communism of the Soviet Union and the left of social democracy. It was born, then, with the intention of positioning itself against both an existing left project (Soviet communism) and a centre-left one (social democracy). Furthermore, there was a determination to avoid being confined to a minoritarian political space (reserved for the left of the left), but, rather, to forge a political space that can appeal to a social, and consequently electoral, majority. So the potential of Eurocommunism is accompanied from the beginning by its own limitation: the necessity of both moving away from the existing left and avoiding getting too close to the social-democratic political space. This dilemma was always present in the debates on Eurocommunism and later resurfaced when Podemos was founded.

Gramsci became a key referent for those trying to think about the formation of a majority for socialism within a liberal capitalist society. His concept of seeking to build a socialist (or, in the terms of Podemos, populist) counter-hegemony was central to these attempts. In particular, the distinction Gramsci made between a war of position and a war of manoeuvre was drawn on by those exploring the possibilities for democratic socialism in the context of liberal democracies. (A war of manoeuvre involves a direct confrontation with enemy forces, whereas a war of position is based on digging-in across a whole terrain as a means of securing military advantage.) For Gramsci, the war of manoeuvre corresponded to a model of revolution based on insurrection. This might well have been adequate for situations where civil society was underdeveloped, and the revolution could target

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the dominant class by defeating its military forces and the state, as was the case with the Russian Revolution. But it was unlikely to work in states with a more developed civil society. In contrast with the immediacy of the war of manoeuvre, the war of position implies a longer and more complex process in which the fight for hegemony precedes the conquest of the state. Struggle within civil society can help forge the capacity to reshape the hegemonic order, and ideological battles on socioeconomic relations, the political worldview and cultural values can lead to an advance in the consolidation of positions (trenches). There is a potential within civil society for challenging the superstructures (the ideological dimension of hegemony) that sustain the capitalist system - of establishing a counter-hegemonic movement. The notion of hegemony and counter hegemony expands the scope of the political goal beyond the simple notion of taking power (the state) and places the terrain of civil society as a key site of contestation; within this terrain there is the potential for constant effort to generate a new hegemony by winning advantage in the war of position.

The cultural dimension of hegemony, grounded in the role of civil society and the intellectual and moral leadership to be offered by the communist party, was very attractive to Eurocommunists in Spain as elsewhere. In Spain these ideas were crucial during the post-dictatorship conjuncture, when the pillars for a liberal democracy were being established amid tensions between the legacy of dictatorship and the move towards democratic forms and institutions. The idea of 'historic compromise' had been championed by Enrico Berlinguer, the leader of the Eurocommunist PCI (Italian Communist Party), whose aim was to create a multiparty alliance in Italy between the Christian Democrat Party (DC) and the PCI, as a way of achieving majority support and a deepening process of democratic transformation. Similarly, and because of the need to support the democratic transition, the PCE decided to participate alongside the other political parties in the elaboration of the framework that defined the shift from dictatorship to democracy; while its support for the 'Moncloa Agreements' in 1977 was motivated by the need for unity across the democratic political parties during a period of intense economic and labour crisis, and of uncertainty provoked by the shadow of anti-democratic forces.

The influence of Gramsci had been shaped in a particular way by the influential PCI, for whom the revolutionary path drawn by Gramsci had been reduced to a

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reformist political strategy aimed at reaching consensus and the support of society.² The PCE made compromises along similar lines, but in spite of this, after the transition it gradually lost its position of intellectual and moral leadership, whilst PSOE, the social-democratic party, obtained an absolute majority in the 1982 general election. Furthermore, the electoral results of the PCE during Carrillo's leadership were not in any way comparable to those of Berlinguer in Italy. The consequences were quite similar, however. The commitment to a democratic and pluralistic road to socialism evolved into a practice of reformism and a focus on institutional change *within* the dominant hegemonic framework.³ Gramsci's idea of revolution without revolution was gradually replaced by the idea of reform without revolution. The failure to secure strong enough 'trenches' within civil society, in combination with the PCE's low levels of electoral support, led Carrillo into a political space closer to social democracy than to democratic socialism - as also happened with the PCI.

When Podemos later reintroduced Gramsci into the political strategy of the left, the objective was the opposite to the one adopted by Eurocommunism. Podemos maintained the centrality of hegemony and reaching a social majority, but the idea of collaborating with other parties or contributing to a broad political consensus was not initially part of its strategy. Rather than searching for consensus, Podemos explicitly positioned itself as an emergent party in conflict with the parties of the establishment (basically those that had supported the Moncloa Agreements and participated in the design for the transition to democracy). This push for rupture was, however, still framed by Iglesias in terms of a 'war of position'.⁴ Iglesias pointed to the opportunities opened up during a period of organic crisis to question hegemonic narratives and to work to produce political change. Podemos sought to control the narrative of the crisis, and to determine the necessary solutions to overcome it. Only if Podemos was able to place issues such as economic democratisation at the core of the political debate could change take place. If this did not happen, change would be reduced to mere reform, or to renewal of the establishment elite.

Iglesias referred to electoral campaigns as a 'simplified war of the trenches', but it is clear that in his framework hegemony is related to winning elections and participating in government. For this purpose, it is necessary to forge a narrative that appeals to the social majority. The difference with Eurocommunism lay in the initial belief by Podemos that it could become the major party of the left, and that it

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did not need to reach consensus with other political parties. However, the emphasis on the cultural battle and on winning 'electoral positions' involved the risk, present in Eurocommunism, of blurring Gramsci's idea of revolution without revolution. In his speech at the first General Assembly of Podemos, Iglesias had proclaimed that 'Heaven is not taken by consensus, it is taken by assault' - but this was in reference to Podemos becoming the biggest electoral force, overtaking PSOE. This statement already revealed an understanding of hegemony that was not about the 'war of position' but about the 'culture/narrative war'. Once Podemos became part of the Parliament, after spectacular electoral results - though not spectacular enough to overcome PSOE - the 'positions' gained were mainly within the realm of the institutional battle to reform politics.

It is interesting to note that, both for Eurocommunism and the left-populism of Podemos, the use of Gramsci (particularly the concepts of hegemony and the war of position) is integral to their strategies to obtain major influence and to promote democratic and institutional transformation. Yet, though the war of manoeuvre may very well be inadequate for changing liberal democracies, the various interpretations of the war of position have also shown themselves to be unequal to the task of creating new forms of (socialist) hegemony. Critics from the left stress that Eurocommunists, including the PCE, did not, in reality, follow Gramsci's conceptualisation, since they read Gramsci through Palmiro Togliatti, while, in the case of Podemos, they read him through Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. This would explain the reformist nature of these political projects and their incapacity to develop a revolutionary project. My belief is that these political experiences, in different contexts, illustrate the inherent difficulties for the left of a strategy of winning elections or gaining institutional and political influence, and transforming power from there. The inclusion of civil society in the formation of hegemony has been challenging: neither the Communist Party nor Podemos have sought to enhance mechanisms of participation, or to open up their approaches to organisation so as to include and collaborate with civil society. The fact that Gramsci became a prominent intellectual reference point in the political conjunctures I have been discussing proves the need for deeper thinking about power, and the relations between superstructure and infrastructure, as well as between civil society and the state.

The question about how the concepts of the war of position and hegemony

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can contribute, in practice, to the consolidation of socialism in liberal democracies remains unsolved. The strategies for reaching majorities, whether through consensus or conflict, have led to what have been considered to be reformist positions, closer to social democracy, as a consequence of their engagement with institutional politics. That makes it all the more important to consider the question of how to expand political transformation to include the sphere of civil society, and how such transformation could be radicalised, according to Gramsci's idea of revolution without revolution.

United Left: Two banks

The foundation of the United Left in 1986 was rooted in the broad political and social alliance in favour of Spain leaving NATO; and it also implied a change in the political direction of the PCE, which had decided to promote, and be part of, the new coalition of parties. This convergence of left parties displaced the project of the communist party as the leading party in reaching a common space for communists and social democrats. Carrillo's position during this period, as well as that of Communism more widely, was labelled as 'moderatism', taking a moderate position in order to guarantee democratic consolidation and to avoid the re-composition of the anti-democratic right.⁵

Since then, the figure of Carrillo and the legacy of Eurocommunism have had a difficult relationship with the PCE, and by extension the IU. At their political conference in 2018, the PCE reintroduced the notion of Leninism, in attempt to reclaim classical ideas about how popular forces gain access to government, and how they can later create alternative institutions of the state. When Enrique Santiago, the general secretary of IU, was asked if this reclaiming of Leninism was a way of disputing the legacy of Carrillo, his response was that Eurocommunism had ceased to exist, and therefore it was time to recover Leninism.⁶ The PCE has also been critical of Carrillo's abandonment of the strategy of democratic rupture. The association of Carrillo and Eurocommunism with reformism and 'social democratisation' has been a constant in the debates of the PCE, and in its ideological self-definition. This division between the 'real' left - defined, internally, in opposition to the reformist left - has also been a characteristic of struggles within IU and Podemos, and, recently, struggles between Podemos and Sumar.

Moreover, Carrillo made it difficult to claim his legacy within the PCE and IU for

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other reasons. Despite the poor electoral results in 1982, when the party obtained only four seats in Parliament, he refused to give up the secretaryship. He wanted to maintain his control over the party by giving the general secretariat to Gerardo Iglesias, who was loyal to Carrillismo, and by continuing as spokesperson. Quite soon after this, however, internal conflicts broke out, and Carrillo accused Iglesias of trying to sell the party to the social-democratic party, moving to the right, and betraying the communist party. Paradoxically, Gerardo Iglesias had been pursuing the unification of the left in opposition to the move towards the centre-right space of the PSOE, whilst Carrillismo considered the PSOE as a left party and an ally, and not at all as an enemy. Carrillo was eventually expelled from PCE, in yet another reflection of an environment of perpetual internal struggles. He was also fiercely critical of IU, which, according to him, would lead to the end of the PCE. Despite these disagreements, Carrillismo still tried to re-integrate itself into the PCE, but was rejected. Finally, Carrillismo (though not Carrillo), while seeing Gerardo Iglesias and Julio Anguita as responsible for the PCE's drift to the right, ended up being integrated into PSOE. Whilst Carrillo claimed to represent authentic communism, the PCE rejected the legacy of Carrillo for being reformist and indistinguishable from social democracy.

Within IU, the PCE initiated a left alternative, differentiated from Eurocommunism and Carrillo. Julio Anguita, IU's general coordinator (1989-2000), elaborated the theory of the two banks (*dos orillas*), in opposition to the idea of a space of convergence between communists and social democrats. The two banks defined a divide between the parties of the system (PSOE, the conservative People's Party (PP), and the Catalan and Basque nationalist parties), all of which supported neoliberalism, and IU, the left and only real opposition. Although this discourse was supported by the majority of IU, a critical fraction, 'New Left' (Nueva Izquierda), emerged to express its dissatisfaction with the theory of the two banks. According to the leaders of the New Left, Anguita's strategy was erroneous, since it implied the isolation of the party and the impossibility of collaborating with other parties. Anguita, whose defence of his position was that any form of co-operation could only be based on programmatic agreements, responded by expelling the leaders of the New Left for being undercover sympathisers of PSOE. The expelled New Left members of Parliament, who were in favour of the unity of the left, then joined the parliamentary group of PSOE. These circumstances gave further support to the idea that there was a direct connection between Eurocommunism, as illustrated by New

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Left, and social democracy. The legacy of Carrillo is, thus, perceived as reformist, as he had rejected the idea of democratic rupture, while Eurocommunism is seen as embodying a recurrent impetus to move towards social democracy.

When Gaspar Llamazares became general coordinator of IU in 2000, its electoral support was declining, and PSOE leader Zapatero had initiated an organisational and ideological redefinition of social democracy in crisis. Llamazares pursued a political line oriented towards co-operation with social democracy on the grounds that it was the most efficient mode of gaining influence and of passing progressive policies. This position clashed with that of the PCE, and reintroduced the debate between the reformist (IU) and the real (PCE) left. The disagreements were not only about the current line as pursued by Llamazares; they also related to the interpretation of the role of PCE during the transition. The general secretary of the PCE, José Luis Centella, attacked the reformist position attributed to the PCE during the period of transition, including the adoption of Eurocommunism. In response, Llamazares argued that the idea of 'agreed rupture' was adopted due to the impossibility, in the prevailing circumstances of the period, of any form of 'democratic rupture'; and that the idea of the party demanding a Spanish Republic, or staying outside NATO, or calling for the end of capitalism, did not correspond to the constraints of that historical moment. Llamazares can thus be seen as having recovered some of the principles of Eurocommunism, such as pluralism, and as having recognised its importance as a democratic way to socialism.

After the financial crisis of 2008, IU once more faced poor electoral results. The reformist line of Llamazares was criticised for not creating a distinguishable profile from social democracy. This was the explanation given for IU's lack of success. The consequences of the crisis determined a change in the position of the PCE, and in IU discourse, and this was articulated by its new coordinator (until 2016), Cayo Lara. IU positioned itself against the two-party system (PSOE and PP) and even tried to create an anti-capitalist front. However, Lara, and by extension IU, were quite slow to react to the demands of civil society after the *indignados* movement in 2011; while the foundation of Podemos accentuated the difficulties in finding IU's own distinct voice in the political sphere. In 2016, when Alberto Garzón became its new coordinator, IU strengthened its cooperation with Podemos, which resulted in the electoral coalition Unidos Podemos. Before this, the relationship between IU and Podemos had mainly been characterised by rivalry. IU was sceptical about Podemos,

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which it perceived as a sort of 'light left', while Podemos considered IU to be a party of the establishment, disconnected from the new forms of doing politics as demanded by civil society. Garzón's approach to Podemos was a change to previous policy, but he maintained IU's critical standpoint against the reformist tradition as incarnated by Carrillo. In 2019, Llamazares left IU in disagreement with Garzón's strategy, including the alliance with Podemos, on the grounds that it would lead IU into irrelevance and gradual disappearance. According to Llamazares, there was no room for internal pluralism and disagreements within the party. (As we will see later, Garzón became involved in the formation of the government coalition in 2019, together with Podemos, and in 2023 with Sumar but without Podemos.)

In this short summary of the history of the PCE and IU, two recurring elements stand out: the continuing internal struggles within the parties (not only struggles between fractions but also personal disputes); and the reproduction, in different ways at different times, of divisions between the 'real' and 'reformist' left. In the end, Eurocommunism typically reappeared as a way of referring to reformist movements within the party, or was invoked in accusations of representing a hidden way of moving the left to the space of social democracy.

Podemos: From populism to government coalition

While IU rejected the Eurocommunist tradition and strengthened its ideological left identity, as symbolised by its recovery of Leninism, the irruption of Podemos led to the activation of different frameworks, as part of an attempt to understand this novel phenomenon. One of these frameworks was Eurocommunism - though no one in Podemos would ever reclaim that particular heritage.

There are two key moments in which the overlaps between Podemos and Eurocommunism can be discerned. The first one is the initial two-to-three-year period of Podemos, when the party adopted a left-populist strategy; and the second one is the period of government coalition between Unidas Podemos and PSOE, from November 2019. Though Podemos in no way recognised any similarities with Eurocommunism, it can be seen to be present in the public debate. These two moments were characterised by internal struggles; the reproduction of the reformist v left divide (or Eurocommunism/populism v Leninism/workerism); and continuous redefinitions of the position of Podemos as against PSOE (including the 'risks of social democratisation' for the party).

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Inspired by the mobilisations of 15M, the Latin American progressive governments of the Pink Tide, and the work of Laclau and Mouffe, the first Podemos was characterised as left-populist, especially due to the strong leadership figure of Iglesias and the transversal strategy (an attempt to reach a social majority without using a strong ideological left discourse). As mentioned above, Podemos repudiated the regime of 1978 (the political and legal framework resulting from the transition to democracy); and it accused the parties of the establishment (including IU) of being '*la casta*' (the establishment elite), pursuing the aim of overcoming PSOE electorally. This position was in strong contrast to the Eurocommunist project and legacy. However, the use of a vertical axis to portray the central political antagonism (people v *la casta*), instead of a left v right axis, and the commitment to transversality in order to appeal to the majority, made Podemos open to accusations of being reformist and lacking left profile. In addition, the combination of Pablo Iglesias and Iñigo Errejón as leader and ideologist respectively, opened up an internal space of division. Errejón, main defender of populism, was labelled as the visible face of reformism, whilst Iglesias was positioned as on the left (quite often labelled - and with diverse intentions - as Leninist). During this period, Podemos positioned itself against IU, which it depicted as an old-fashioned left party, as well as PSOE. Podemos was considered a pragmatic party in comparison to IU: a kind of catch-all-party in search of obtaining more votes than PSOE to form a government. But internally the division (and later rupture) between reformists and leftists was playing an important role.

The aim of translating the 15M movement into a left-populist political project was strongly affected by the inherent tensions for the left in liberal democracy: on the one hand, the transversal appeal to the people, barely ideologically charged, seemed to be a way of connecting with the 15M intention of including the majority (the 99%); but, on the other hand, the major role given to leadership and electoral strategy contrasted with the aim of making democracy more participatory ('real democracy now!'). The attempt to increase mechanisms of participation was, indeed, abandoned by Podemos at an early stage. Internal divisions, both personal and strategic, characterised the evolution of the party during that time. Errejón's populism and 'moderatism' were associated with Eurocommunism, although he was against an electoral coalition between Podemos and IU. Iglesias, on the other hand, had been a member of Communist Youth and had co-operated with the PCE, and was very knowledgeable about Berlinger's PCI. During the time when the investiture

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of PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez as prime minister was at stake in 2016, this division was accentuated. Iglesias did not want to support a coalition government between PSOE and the socio-liberal party Ciudadanos. He adopted a confrontational position towards PSOE and distanced himself from the political approach incarnated by Carrillo: 'Maybe [Carrillo] had no choice but to say yes to everything. We are not a left of your order. Everything was forgiven in the case of Carrillo, even meeting with Stalin; no one forgives us for telling them what they are'.⁷ Iglesias rejected all that was represented by the figure of Carrillo, which he equated with pragmatism, by moving to a clearer left identity (leaving transversality and populism behind) and reproducing Anguita's theory of two banks (through his claim that Podemos was not the party of the establishment). While Garzón supported this view of Carrillo as illustration of the 'domesticated' left, Errejón's position was placed as a 'politics of order'. This strengthened the idea of promoting an option from the left (Podemos and IU), and Errejón's idea of transversality - aimed at occupying part of the electoral space of the centre-left - lost appeal as political strategy for Podemos.

The split between the fractions of Iglesias and Errejón, as well as the electoral coalition with IU, consolidated, then, a return by Podemos to the left v right axis. However, at the same time Podemos was gradually replacing the rhetoric of rupture with the intention of becoming a 'governmental party', and of pushing PSOE towards a more leftist politics. This new course culminated in the coalition government between PSOE and Unidas Podemos in late 2019. Podemos still retained some elements of support for rupture in order to differentiate itself from PSOE (the party of the establishment), including a positive disposition towards a referendum in Catalonia and the maintenance of a strong critique of the monarchy, as well as a deepening of its feminist politics (less present in its beginnings). However, its joining the coalition government led to multiple references to the PCI and the PCE and the insertion of Pablo Iglesias within the Eurocommunist tradition.⁸ Podemos was electorally weaker than it had been a few years earlier, but a stronger institutional Podemos had emerged, fulfilling the objective fixed by Eurocommunism: the formation of a common space for the left by a coalition government. Significantly, IU, with its Eurocommunist past, was a participant in the same project.

In his last interview as secretary of Podemos, Iglesias referred - and not casually - to Enrico Berlinguer. He emphasised that Berlinguer was not able to achieve what

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he himself had accomplished: 'a Marxist in a government of the Atlantic Alliance'.⁹ It is interesting that Iglesias assessed his legacy when leaving his 'political life' in the light of the figure of Berlinguer, defender of the democratic road to socialism and of a wide and pluralistic project for the left. There is an important difference in the way in which Iglesias has been portrayed by mainstream media as compared with other Communist leaders: Iglesias has been accused of radicalising the government and of moving Sánchez towards extremist positions. In other words, Iglesias did not fit within the category of 'moderatism'. Although the policies supported and carried out by Unidas Podemos could easily be characterised as social-democratic, Iglesias maintained a tone and style that was uncomfortable for mainstream media and other political parties. His idea of a plurinational state and his sympathy with the left nationalist parties did not correspond with the PCE's adoption of the notion of 'historic compromise'; and nor did his support for cross-party and class alliances. Furthermore, its strong emphasis on left ideology, and the expulsion and departure of many members who disagreed with Iglesias's political line, had the effect of reducing the political space occupied by Podemos and limiting any possibility of contributing to the future of a common left project.

As a consequence, Podemos ended up leaving the newly constituted left coalition Sumar (Unite), inaugurated in 2022, because they felt excluded from the decision-making processes, and this meant that Podemos did not become part of the new coalition government of 2023. Iglesias (now as a media person) has encouraged Podemos to represent the 'real' left against the 'domesticated left'. According to him, the oligarchy's aim is that 'the left of Santiago Carrillo comes back and Podemos dies'.¹⁰ As in 2016, Iglesias has rejected the idea of any similarity of his project to Eurocommunism, Carrillo, or the reformist left. The difference between then and now is that the high levels of electoral support have now gone, and Podemos only has five MPs; it is, therefore, far away from the possibility of playing an influential role. Returning to the theory of the two banks, Podemos defines itself against the left of Sumar and PSOE, and has left behind its initial intention of being a central party in developing a politics for the social majority.

Sumar: Labourism

The origin of Sumar is quite unusual and very different from the attempt by Podemos to channel social discontent and include civil society into politics. In

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2021 Iglesias appointed Yolanda Díaz (Minister of Labour) as the new leader and top candidate for Unidas Podemos for the general elections. Instead of ensuring a continuity with his own leadership, which would have meant designating Irene Montero (then Minister of Equality), Iglesias took a riskier decision, since Díaz was not a member of Podemos but of the PCE. She had left IU due to disagreements with the then coordinator, Garzón (who was Minister of Consumer Affairs from 2020-2023). Iglesias argued that his decision was made for strategic reasons, informed by electoral considerations, and it seemed to reflect a return to the initial aim of Podemos, of having a project and a leader that could appeal to a wider electorate. Using a basketball metaphor, Iglesias suggested that Díaz would be the shooting guard, the player who would score the most points. Díaz would contribute to an increase in the votes/points, because, as Iglesias himself recognised, his own star had already burned out.¹¹ Whether or not Iglesias wanted to be the coach is hard to say, but the path chosen by Díaz has left an insurmountable distance between these two leaders of the left.

Díaz aimed to create her own project and was willing to expand the political space of the left by including parties and leaders who had belonged to Podemos in a previous moment, as well as IU. Subsequently Podemos became very critical of Díaz, before finally leaving Sumar. Meanwhile the electoral coalition as currently constituted is marked by a number of paradoxes. Errejón, who led the populist strategy of Podemos, has become a prominent figure in the new project, and IU too has decided to participate in Sumar. In the past, Errejón was totally opposed to a coalition with IU; while Garzón, when he was IU leader, had been very critical of populism, considering it a new version of Eurocommunism. Podemos, which had initially been the main advocate for a coalition government, is no longer a participant. Díaz was engaged in putting Sumar into place as a political project in the middle of a period of electoral urgency, and at a time when it lacked the formal structure of a party (it is now in the process of becoming a party), and she has also been involved in constant struggles with Podemos - within Sumar in the beginning, and later when it was outside the coalition.

Díaz had a political project focused on unifying the parties to the left of PSOE (including the reluctant Podemos), and repeating the government coalition with PSOE as the best way to defeat a possible coalition government between PP and the far-right VOX. She also had a popular and well-defined profile: she was Minister of

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Labour, and had good relations with the trade unions (especially the Comisiones Obreras), and had a moderate but incisive style as leader. The wide circle of approval of her performance as minister included sympathisers of and voters for PSOE. She had also initiated a ‘process of listening’, consisting of travelling to several Spanish cities to engage in dialogue with civil society actors. The ideological content of the Sumar project was, however, less clear, although, in principle, it would not differ much from that of Unidas Podemos when it was a party in government.

In a speech in Seville in 2023, Díaz stressed the importance of unifying across differences, creating an agreement between the different political traditions, and of ‘walking together’. As well as the message of the speech, the words she chose are interesting, because she was paraphrasing a speech made by Iglesias in 2019. The reason for that was that her objective was the same (unifying the left), but she was also aware of the difficulties of including Podemos within Sumar, as was confirmed when Podemos did not attend the inaugural act of foundation of the new platform.¹² However, the decision by Podemos to keep to a separate path, as the ‘real’ party of the left, and the lack of contact between the leaders of Podemos and Sumar, has not helped her aim of reaching left unity. Despite the different conjuncture, Díaz has adopted a position closer to that of the first Podemos (2014-2016). Her attempt to unify the left, and govern with PSOE, together with her ‘moderatism’, has once more introduced the idea of the re-emergence of Eurocommunism into the political debate.

Her incipient political project has been labelled ‘labourism’ (some in the media try to connect it with ‘New Labour’), due to the importance it attributes to the worker as universal subject;¹³ this has replaced the invocation of ‘the people’ by the first Podemos, and the idea of speaking the truth to power, developed by Iglesias. Her measures during her term as Minister of Labour supported the centrality of work, and included labour reform legislation that was supported by both the trade unions and employers’ associations; this stressed the transversal scope of her politics. As well as her support for the unions, a number of other initiatives have given a particular form to her understanding of labourism, including her understanding of the intersection between feminism and labour/class, a focus on new forms of precarisation and on ensuring social protection (e.g. the retirement system), and a proposal for a ‘Labourist International’, promoted in Latin America.

Although Díaz felt closer to Anguita than to Carrillo, her project, rooted in the

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communist tradition and integrating IU among other parties, shares some similarities with Eurocommunism. As far as the war of position is concerned, it is not yet clear whether or not her idea of democratising the economy will lead to a new phase of deepening socialism; it is also possible it may end up as an instance of what Gramsci described as passive revolution - organised from above and with no democratic participation from below.¹⁴

In other words, what is at stake once more with Sumar is the possibility of defining a political space to the left of the PSOE. The options are there: Díaz's labourism could gain strength and enable more influence on the politics of the coalition government; alternatively, Sumar could move towards positions close to social democracy (with the risk of being absorbed by it). The ongoing process of formation of Sumar as a party should clarify its ability to contribute to forging such a political space. So far, the balance of forces (i.e. the electoral result) does not point to the possibility of Sumar being able to determine a course for the left.

Unifying by dividing

A young Pablo Iglesias interviewed Santiago Carrillo in 2011. The interview started by quoting Ignazio Silone telling Palmiro Togliatti that: 'the last fight will be between communists and ex-communists'. Iglesias asked Carrillo (whom he considered to be a right-wing Eurocommunist) about his break with his friend Fernando Claudín (a left-wing Eurocommunist who later became a member of PSOE). Iglesias could not understand the propensity of twentieth-century communists for devouring themselves. Iglesias could not imagine then that he would later be repeatedly involved in a similar situation: especially with Iñigo Errejón, at the time when they were seen as representing the two 'souls' of Podemos, but also, later, with Alberto Garzón, a crucial person in achieving the agreement between Podemos and IU, and, more recently, with Yolanda Díaz, whom he had designated as successor to the leadership of Unidas Podemos. Although in its early days Podemos expressed in multiple interviews the importance of friendship and of talking directly with each other to solve any problems, and to be accepting of differences, the truth is that the party went on to reproduce the same problem that had already manifested itself throughout Carrillo's political life: internal division, fragmentation of the left, expulsions, and irreconcilable divisions both politically and personally. Garzón even implied a new parallelism between Carrillo and Iglesias when claiming that

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Carrillo had also founded a new communist party (in 1986) that was characterised by dogmatic intransigency and discursive radicalism.¹⁵ According to Garzón, the current strategy of Podemos would echo that situation by dividing the left. The practice of Eurocommunism always seems to come up against the foundational contradiction between its aspiration to recognise and promote political pluralism, and its internal organisational structures that have been unable to make any space for pluralism and differing positions.

There was also an irreducible tension in Eurocommunism in relation to its concepts of state and society.¹⁶ The focus on cultural hegemony and the important role of civil society in reshaping the state was never successfully complemented by a strategy for increased participation and the inclusion of civil society. It was party politics and electoral strategy that determined the attempt by the PCE to overtake the role of PSOE: hegemony was, in this sense, a matter of being able to influence the politics of PSOE; it was not seen as involving the building of secure majority support for deeper cultural and political change. More recently the left has been clearer when it has sought to define a counterhegemonic project (as in the theory of the two banks, or the repudiation of the regime of 78); but it has faced similar problems in seeking to materialise a hegemonic project as a political formation. The pace at which hegemony is shaped and developed is much slower than the political rhythm marked by elections. This explains some of the difficulties of developing a politics based on a war of position; the tendency towards reform being secured through a process of passive revolution rather than active participation; and the development of a reformist agenda that envisages a gradual road to socialism. These risks, and the need to be alert to the danger of becoming centre-left, social-democratised, or losing the transformative impetus, are associated with all projects - including Eurocommunism, Podemos and Sumar - that pursue political and social change within the framework of liberal democracies.

Given that Eurocommunism was marked by serious limitations in the past, why is it then relevant to still think about it? As I have tried to show, Eurocommunism represents an attempt to create and own the necessary political space to advance socialism in liberal democracies, and to search for ways of building a counter-hegemonic project within civil society (which would imply cross-class alliances and a subject of change larger than the working class). The debate on how to do this, initiated by Eurocommunism, pops up regularly and serially reproduces

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confrontational positions between reformists and ‘real’ leftists or revolutionaries. The problem, however, is not this division per se, but the apparent inability to widen the space of the left to accommodate pluralism. The objective is to create hegemony and advance in the war of position, but it is difficult to imagine how positions can be consolidated given the perpetual conflicts in the left bloc. Regardless of whether the goal is democratic socialism, and the subject the people or the workers, attempts to expand the political space of the left, in a representative and participatory sense, cannot be achieved through the narrowing of the internal space of organisation and debate.

The coalition government cannot be a final objective, even from a Eurocommunist perspective, if in the next elections the left party cannot ensure its ability to influence, or if civil society is demobilised. By returning to the political conjunctures in which it has previously developed strategies to strengthen its project, and learning from past successes and mistakes, the left is more likely to be able to shape its own narrative for thinking about the past and dealing with the future. From this perspective, Eurocommunism is a reminder of the challenges and risks of forging a left project aiming to govern and become hegemonic. Reproducing the logics that create enemies within the left has not so far proven to be the most efficient strategy for expanding the political space.

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