

Populism in Spain: The Role of Ideational Change in Podemos.

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Ideational approaches have identified the necessary presence of three ideas in populist discourse: a morally Manichean cosmic struggle, a virtuous and homogeneous people, and a corrupt and self-serving elite (see Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser's introduction to this volume). This set of ideas was conspicuously absent in Spanish party politics over the past forty years. The outburst of Podemos in 2014, however, introduced a new populist rhetoric exhibiting the key three components of the ideational definition of populism adopted in this volume. The political message of Podemos (We Can) was a cry for rupture and change directed against the economic and political establishment — *la casta*, in the language of the party. Populist ideas moved to center stage as Podemos attained, just two months after its official foundation, 8% of the votes in the 2014 European Parliament Elections. And in the general elections of December 2015 and June 2016, the electoral alliance built around Podemos attained 20.7 and 21.1% of the votes respectively, at very short distance from the Socialist Party.

This chapter addresses the recent emergence of a populist political discourse in the Spanish context. It focuses on the factors that led some political activists to articulate a populist discourse in a country in which such a set of ideas had been missing since the transition to democracy in the 1970s. In this chapter, we seek to explain why, how and when a group of radical left activists came to adopt a populist political discourse to launch a new political party. In line with the theoretical interpretation underlining this volume (see the introduction by Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser to this volume), our approach highlights the crucial and autonomous role that populist ideas played in processes of

political change. Our objective is to trace the intellectual and ideological developments that took place among radical-left social science researchers and activists and that led to the launching of Podemos and the adoption of a populist rhetoric. Background conditions for these developments were the perceived shortcomings of Marxist political theory, the weakness of radical-left political groups, and the vitality of populist transformative movements in Latin America. It is in this context that some of the founders of Podemos concluded that Laclau's discourse theory was much more useful for the success of a radical and transformative political project than Marxism. Particularly important in this respect were the learning processes and theoretical reflections of one of the founders of Podemos, Íñigo Errejón, whose scholarly and political texts displayed a transformation in the direction of a populist proposal around the year 2011. This proposal, later labeled the "populist hypothesis," implied a theoretically grounded conjecture about Spanish politics that had to be subjected to empirical test. This chapter explains the processes by which the populist ideas came into existence, how the populist project was pushed to the front in the hands of Errejón for the 2014 European Elections and became afterwards the successful new rhetoric of the party.

Our chapter consists of a process-tracing case study (George and McKeown 1985; George and Benet 2005; Collier 2011; Beach and Pedersen: 2013; Bennett and Checkel 2015) of the jointly-sufficient mechanisms that led to the adoption of a populist discourse by Podemos in 2014. Given its case-centered character, our work fits well the main characteristics of explaining-outcome case studies (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 12). However, by showing the crucial role played by ideational transformations, our chapter aims also at improving our theoretical understanding of the processes by virtue of which ideas can act as causal forces (see also Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser in the introduction to this volume) and determine processes of change and innovation in party

discourses and strategies. As it is claimed in this volume, the effects of these changes can be measured by empirical analyses on both the populist contents of party discourses (Hawkins and Silva in this volume) and the electoral activation of populist public attitudes (Andreadis et al in this volume).

The evidence we found in scholarly and political texts shows with certainty the presence of strong ideational transformations among some of the founders of Podemos in the period preceding party formation. The perception shared by orthodox Marxist and non-Marxist activists that populist discourse theory determined the populist character of the 2014 electoral campaign is also consistent with this causal interpretation. In our view, these combined facts discard the hypothesis that populist discourse was developed and advocated in order to "strategically misrepresent the reasoning underlying" political choices, one of the challenges identified by Jacobs for ideational explanations, since evidence can be biased when actors conceal their true motives (Jacobs 2015, 45).

Our analysis provides us with evidence that is highly certain (the explanatory hypothesis on the role of ideational changes certainly predicts the evidence), and, to a slightly lesser degree, unique (our explanatory hypothesis uniquely predicts the evidence we gathered in political texts and personal interviews). Our work thus approaches the characteristics of doubly decisive evidentiary tests (Van Evera 1997; Bennett 2015, 288). This evidence also falsifies rival hypotheses on the emergence of populist discourse. Populist discourse did not arise out of the preexisting political ideas of radical left activists (who in many cases perceived populist elements with skepticism and mistrust, even within the close group that founded Podemos). And it did not arise either out of the populist orientations of the Spanish public, through a bottom-up deliberative process emerging out of the preceding 15M mobilization. Rather, the introduction of a populist discourse resulted from changes in the ideas held by key political actors and from

the political and strategic opportunities that shaped the course of ideational change (Jacobs 2015).

In this respect, our theory follows Popper's interpretation on the crucial role played by *world 3* abstract components: the objective contents of thought (theoretical systems, problems, problem situations, and critical arguments) in social life (Popper 1985, 58-59, 265-6; Popper and Eccles 1985, 38-41). As in the case of Popper's interpretation, ideational and theoretical changes are connected to problem situations (the failure of Marxist political theory, radical left political actors and social mobilization in this case). In turn, the adoption of a new theoretical framework would lead to the adoption of a new competitive strategy (populist discourse). In this case, changes in theories and ideas cannot be predicted in a mechanistic way based on social, economic or political events. Ideas have an at least partially autonomous character, and they can evolve in initially unimagined directions depending of quite complex combinations of circumstances (such as individual thought-processes, public deliberation, political-institutional settings, exogenous events, and emerging problem situations).¹ In our case, the fact that an articulated and persuasive populist discourse theory was first developed by a political science researcher and activist who ended up becoming the campaign chief

¹ Ideational contents cannot be understood merely on the basis of objective sociopolitical phenomena, even if such contents aim in the end at interpreting and transforming prevailing political conditions. It has been often shown how strictly social and political analyses, no matter how sophisticate they are, fall short of their goal of interpreting the objective content of intellectual works (see for instance Gordon's reflections on Bourdieu's sociological analysis of Martin Heidegger's ideas) (Gordon 2012, 351-354).

for the 2014 European Elections campaign also reveals the importance of the sequence of events and contingent developments in this political process of ideational change.

In the first section of this chapter we present the political opportunity structure that preceded the launching of Podemos. In the second section we narrow our focus by analyzing the foundation of Podemos as a result of the confluence of different political groups and activists. Finally, in the third section we analyze political and scholarly texts, published interviews, and oral testimonies in order to trace the purposeful adoption of populist ideas. Our analysis thus moves from the general historical and political context to the ideational processes of innovation that preceded the adoption of a populist discourse.

The Political Opportunity Structure: The Great Recession and the 15M

In May 12, 2010, the Socialist Spanish government presided over by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced a severe austerity package that reduced public expenditures by 1.5% of the GDP. This package followed the escalation of the debt crisis and the financial rescue of the Greek economy in April-May 2010. It also responded to the rapidly growing pressures exercised by European governments on the Spanish government to adopt severe fiscal consolidation measures, most notoriously, in the 9 May EU meeting of the economics and finance ministers.

Economic reforms aiming at fiscal consolidation would continue under the Rodríguez Zapatero government. These reforms did not bring economic recovery. The Spanish economy grew by 0.2% in 2010 and -0.6% in 2011, and the unemployment rate rose to 20.1% in 2010 and 22.6% in 2011. Among people younger than 25 years old, the unemployment rate in 2010 was higher than 40%.²

² See BBVA Research (2011).

Poor economic performance and negative economic evaluations had quite negative effects on voting for the Socialist Party in 2011 (Fraile and Lewis-Beck 2014; Torcal 2014).³ As President Rodríguez Zapatero himself later acknowledged (Rodríguez Zapatero 2014), these reforms implied a strong departure from the policies advocated by Socialist governments from the 1980s onwards and led to a strong sense of alienation among Socialist votes. From 2008 to 2011 the share of vote for the Socialist party in the general elections dropped from 43.9 to 28.7%, and the absolute number of socialist voters fell by more than 4 million.

Almost in a parallel way very important corruption cases came to light. Corruption scandals were connected to the funding of political parties (as in the Gürtel, Púnica, and Bárcenas cases for the Popular Party, and the Palau and ITV cases for the Catalan Democratic Convergence), to the clientelistic allocation of large sums of money (as in the case of the ERE funds that the Andalusian Socialist government provided for businesses in crisis and employees losing their jobs), or to the mismanagement and fraudulent use of regional banking institutions, as in the case of the Bankia. By 2014, the number of individuals subjected to judicial proceedings due to corruption scandals rose to almost 2000.⁴ Not surprisingly, public concern with political corruption escalated. The

³ The voting impact of economic evaluations remained crucial in future electoral contests. Negative sociotropic evaluations punished the PP and favored its main competitors, in particular, Podemos. See Andreadis et al's chapter in this volume and Lavezollo and Ramiro (2017).

⁴ See <http://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-radiografia-corrupcion-espana-mas-1900-imputados-menos-170-condenados-mas-130-causas-20141102111941.html>

(accessed November 11th, 2016).

percentage of people who thought that corruption was one of the main problems of the country jumped from less than 5% in the early 2000s to more than 40% in 2013 (Medina 2015, 12).

In this social and economic context, in May 2011, a wave of social protests against unemployment, cuts in social expenditures, and the privileges of the political class erupted (Mora 2012; Minguijón Pablo and Pac Salas 2013). Protests crystallized in camp-outs all across Spain that would last in some cases until August 2011. Although protesters had a distinctive social and ideological profile (young people with a high overrepresentation of college graduates and leftist activists) (Calvo, Gómez-Pastrana, and Mena 2011; Minguijón Pablo and Pac Salas 2013), this wave of social mobilizations had transversal characteristics and appealed to people with quite diverse previous political sympathies. According to different surveys (Calvo, Gómez-Pastrana and Mena 2011, 5), in 2011 more than 70% percent of Spaniards felt sympathy for the 15M movement and its demands. Given the transversal and catch-all nature of this wave of social mobilization, and the adversarial, anti-elitist, and wide-range nature of its political demands, the 15M movement fitted very well the characteristics of a populist social movement (Errejón 2015, 145-146; Aslanidis 2016, 305-307).

In the November 2011 general elections, the Popular Party attained an absolute majority of seats in parliament. Rajoy's government continued the austerity policies initiated under Rodríguez Zapatero. Economic reforms did not manage to reduce Spanish unemployment rates, which escalated above 25% by the end of 2012 and remained above that threshold level until mid-2014. Public trust in President Rajoy suffered from this performance and from the scandals affecting the Popular Party. In early 2013, the Bárcenas case broke out in the national press. Allegedly, Luis Bárcenas, the treasurer of the Popular Party, had been using money illegally delivered to the PP in order to fund the

party and to pay monthly bonuses to party leaders.⁵ In June 2013 Bárcenas was sent to prison. By early 2013, surveys conducted by Metroscopia indicated that more than 80% of citizens did not trust President Rajoy⁶. By mid-2013, according to the same polling agency, 60% of the PP voters did not trust the President.⁷

By the end of 2013, the combination of unpopular economic measures, deep economic crisis, and corruption scandals had triggered a strong sense of discontent and political alienation among many Spanish citizens. That feeling was especially acute among former socialist voters, who had witnessed the sharp policy switch made by the Rodríguez Zapatero government, a switch whose economic benefits were very hard to grasp for most Spanish citizens. As shown by different contributions (Roberts 2013 and 2014; Hawkins's and Rovira Kaltwasser's introduction to this volume; Bornschier in this volume), this type of scenario was highly favorable to both a party system transformation and the emergence of a populist discourse.

Particularly important in this process of acute political change was the 15M movement. The 15M paved the way for the emergence of both new political discourses and new political organizations (Errejón 2015; Medina 2015; Nez 2015; Fernández Albertos 2015; Torreblanca 2015). By articulating a transversal social mobilization

⁵ For detailed journalistic reports on the Bárcenas case, see Gallero (2016) and Ekaizer (2013).

⁶ See http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/01/12/actualidad/1358017058_376467.html, accessed July 30th, 2016.

⁷ http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/09/14/actualidad/1379177988_228092.html, accessed July 30th, 2016.

process, dichotomizing the political space, and channeling intense grievances against the political and economic establishment, the 15M adopted populist features and prefigured a more elaborate populist discourse (Errejón 2015: 145-46; Aslanidis 2016). The 15M replaced old divides internal to the political system (left-right) by a new, more radical confrontation between those who were up and those who were down (Errejón 2015, 138-139; Cano 2016, 164-65 and 37-38).

The economic, social, and political events that took place from the 2010 Socialist government austerity package to the 2014 European Parliament elections created a context that was favorable to the emergence of new political forces and the articulation of a disruptive and anti-elite populist discourse. However, the creation of a new political organization and the articulation of populist appeals were also made possible by organizational and ideational developments taking place among specific groups of political activists. In the following section, we turn to the processes by virtue of which these activists coalesced in the foundation of Podemos.

From Social Unrest to the Foundation of Podemos

The launching of Podemos was preceded by debates and meetings among social and political activists that went back to at least 2011. In particular, the open political debates organized by Izquierda Anticapitalista –Anticapitalist Left- in its 2013 summer university led leftist activists to examine the organization of a political alternative for the 2014 European Parliament Elections (Rivero 2015a, 125-27). Izquierda Anticapitalista was a small radical left party born in 2008⁸ that defined itself as a "revolutionary,

⁸ Allegedly it was included in *Bulletin* n.82 of Anticapitalist Left. See http://www.eldiario.es/politica/nacimiento-Podemos-candidatura-Pablo-Iglesias_0_220478302.html (accessed August 20th, 2016).

anticapitalist, internationalist, feminist and socialist organization."⁹ It had run in the 2009 European elections with very poor results and obtaining no representation (0.13% of the vote). The party was, however, very active among the groups and organizations that participated in the 15M movement.

Two very active participants in the debates on the creation of a new party were Pablo Iglesias and Miguel Urbán, the latter an activist of Izquierda Anticapitalista. In December 2013 concrete plans for the launching of a new electoral platform were elaborated by Urbán and Iglesias among other activists. These plans included the electoral platform name and the special role that Iglesias would play in it (Rivero 2015a, 138-39).¹⁰ In addition to Iglesias, Urbán, and Izquierda Anticapitalista, members of other networks of activists joined the project in December (Anon 2016: 22; Rivero 2015a: 139)

The launching of the party was preceded by the manifesto *Mover Ficha*, released in January 14, 2014. Podemos was officially presented in a press conference in Madrid three days after the Manifest, in January 17, 2014. The manifesto *Mover Ficha* was based on an internal document of Izquierda Anticapitalista. Both documents ended with the same statement:

The signatories of this Manifest are convinced that this is the moment to make a step forward. Indignation and new forms of participation must also reach out to politics. In the streets it is repeated "Yes it can be. We say: We can" ("*Sí se puede. Nosotros decimos: Podemos*") (our translation).

⁹ Its origins go back to the organization of *Espacio Alternativo* (Alternative Space), which was created in 1995 by former members of the Trotskyite *Liga Comunista Revolucionaria* (Communist Revolutionary League).

¹⁰ See also interview to Miguel Urbán in Anon. (2016, 22)

Thus, "*Sí se puede*" became the motto to organize the party and gather popular support. The list of signatories of the Manifest included members of Izquierda Anticapitalista, activists from social movements, leftist intellectuals, and trade unionists. However, the future main leaders of Podemos — Iglesias, Carolina Bescansa, and Errejón, all of them young social science researchers connected to the Universidad Complutense — were not among the first signatories.¹¹

Izquierda Anticapitalista was one of the main actors leading to the foundation of Podemos. The other one was the Complutense group, in which Iglesias played a key role. Political activism and cooperation within this Complutense group had evolved in the context of academic life, political associations, and think tanks.¹² Some researchers had collaborated with the now extinct Foundation CEPS (*Centro de Estudios Políticos y Sociales*), a foundation that defined itself as "a political organization (not a party) dedicated to the production of critical thinking and cultural and intellectual work to build consensus among the left." CEPS had been involved in different types of research and in its 15 years of existence it had carried out different projects in Latin America, including Venezuela. Future founders of Podemos, in particular Juan Carlos Monedero, but also

¹¹ Allegedly, the content of the Manifest was perceived as "too leftist" and this prevented the signature of the future leaders of the party.

¹² The previous connection between some of the members of the Complutense group and the postcommunist coalition Izquierda Unida – United Left – (IU) is also very clear. Iglesias was previously a member in the Communist Party youth organization. Iglesias and Errejón worked as advisers for IU in the 2011 electoral campaign (Giménez 2014a, 101; Rivero 2015b, 128-29).

Iglesias, Bescansa, and Errejón participated as advisers and strategic analysts in different projects linked to the Chaves' government.¹³

The confluence between activists of Izquierda Anticapitalista and Complutense members had also crystallized through the media. *La Tuerka* (the Nut), a TV program created in 2010, broadcasted through local TVs and internet, and *Fort Apache*, created in 2012 and broadcasted through HispanTV, the Spanish language emission of the Iranian public TV, served as political talk shows for some of the members of the Complutense team (Giménez 2014b). Iglesias, then an adjunct assistant professor at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, was the anchor and director of a program of political debate that gathered some of the later key figures of Podemos. Beyond *La Tuerka* and *Fort Apache*, Iglesias was able to access the mass media in several TV private channels as a regular *tertuliano*, a talk show guest representing in this case an alternative political discourse. With his characteristic ponytail, eloquent expression, and gentle manners, Iglesias became an increasingly popular public figure.

Podemos as a new political party was officially registered in March 11, 2014. The first electoral list to the European elections was prepared using the main tools later

¹³ The advice provided to Chaves entailed some generous payments by the Venezuelan government to some founders of Podemos. Monedero received more than 400,000 Euros in 2013 for a report that has not been made public yet on the prospects of a single currency in Latin America.

See http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2015/01/20/actualidad/1421789190_331983.html, accessed on August, 5th, 2016).

developed by the organization: the web and the *circles* (the local party branches).¹⁴ Iglesias and his team decided to launch a participatory process both to open up the selection of candidates and elaborate an electoral program for the European elections.

Izquierda Anticapitalista purposefully supported the political project under the banner of *Podemos*, even if it recognized the complex nature of the political confluence between what they considered as two separate souls (*Bulletin 84*, March 5th, 2014). Two months before the European elections, an internal document of Izquierda Anticapitalista stated:

We are aware that we are launching an initiative with a *populist political culture*, but they have a significant convening power, influence and popularity (our translation, emphasis added).

More importantly, between the launching of the Manifest of Podemos in January and the registration of Podemos as a political party in March, just before the 2014 European elections, two key developments took place. First, the party formation process was put in the hands of Iglesias, Bescansa and Errejón. Second, Iglesias delivered the control of the electoral campaign to Errejón. A small coordinating team organized by Errejón was in charge of an electoral campaign highly personalized around the character of Iglesias.

Iglesias's electoral speeches adopted a strongly populist character. They portrayed a Manichean vision of society that pitted the people (*la gente* or *la gente de este país*)

¹⁴ The election was organized as a primaries process (a total of 33,165 people participated).

against "the caste" (*la casta*),¹⁵ that is, the political and economic elites that occupy privileged positions and claim to represent the people through the institutional mechanisms created by the 1978 Spanish Constitution. *La casta* was corrupt and narrowly self-interested; while *la gente* represented hard-work, dignity, solidarity, and true patriotism.

Iglesias's speeches also gave voice to a new type of patriotism aimed at overcoming traditional distinctions between the left and right. In this new interpretation, patriotic pride and dignity were not linked to the Spanish language or ethnic particularism, but to solidarity, hard work, and care for the common good. Patriotism stood now in sharp contrast to the values of those who, notwithstanding the intensity of their Spanish (or peripheral) nationalist appeals, evaded taxes, placed their money in tax havens, and cared only about their banking accounts. These dichotomies conveyed intense antagonisms and an initial rejection of conventional and institutionalized politics (negotiations, consensus, agreements based on mutual compromises). They also turned to rhetorical radicalism in pursuit of systemic changes. In Iglesias's words, who paraphrased Marx's famous revolutionary dictum, "heavens are not taken by consensus, they are taken by assault."¹⁶ The use of Hawkins's (2010) holistic grading technique reveals that Iglesias's speeches

¹⁵ The expression "the caste" was popularized in Italy by two journalists, Stella and Rizzoli (2007), to refer to the privileged status of professional politicians. Iglesias wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on social movements in Italy and Spain, and was familiar with this term and its political uses (Domínguez and Giménez 2014b, 142). Errejón explains some of the reasons for choosing the term caste in Giménez (2014a, 104)

¹⁶ "*El cielo no se toma por consenso, el cielo se toma por asalto.*" (Opening speech in the 2014 Asamblea Ciudadana).

in 2014 were extremely populist – close to the ideal type of populist discourse (a grade of 2 in Hawkins’s populism score).¹⁷

The electoral success confirmed the extraordinary appeal of this new discourse and consolidated the power positions of Iglesias and Errejón.¹⁸ Their power was institutionally consecrated by the results of the founding party congress in November 2014. This congress witnessed the triumph of the organizational model advocated by Iglesias (80.7% of the votes for his top-down model, against the 12.3% received by the bottom-up model proposed by prominent members of Izquierda Anticapitalista)¹⁹ and the total victory of the candidature of Iglesias and his closer associates to the *Consejo Ciudadano*, the governing body of Podemos (Iglesias received 88.6% of the votes for the position of secretary general, while Izquierda Anticapitalista finally declined to present alternative candidates).²⁰ In this Assembly, Errejón was appointed as responsible for both

¹⁷ This grading is based on two discourses made by Iglesias in 2014: his closing campaign speech in the European elections and opening speech in the founding congress. This grading was conducted by Hugo Marcos-Marne and Carolina Plaza, two researchers at the Salamanca University. For data on the more recent 2015 election, see Hawkins’s and Silva’s chapter.

¹⁸ Interview with Jaime Pastor.

¹⁹ See http://www.eldiario.es/politica/Pablo-Iglesias-votacion-partido-Podemos_0_318118325.html, accessed August 5th, 2016.

²⁰ See http://www.eldiario.es/politica/personas-Pablo-Iglesias-incontestable-Podemos_0_324767662.html, accessed August 5th, 2016. On the strategic implications of the organizational model chosen by Podemos, see Gutiérrez and Llamazares (2016: 11).

the political secretariat and electoral campaigns and strategy. This series of political victories consolidated the adoption of a populist discourse in the 2015 general elections.

This does not mean, however, that more classical radical leftists lost all influence in Podemos. Former members of Izquierda Anticapitalista attained positions of power in important regional branches – like Madrid and Andalusia –, and they would exercise strong influence in future political developments in Podemos, both at the regional and national levels.

Learning Processes and Discursive Transformations in the Radical Left Space

The adoption of a populist discourse by Podemos was made possible by ideational and political developments taking place among a few radical left activists and scholars in the first decade of this century. Many of the founders of Podemos were researchers linked to the Universidad Complutense, in particular to the Political Science and Philosophy schools, as well as the CEPS working group. And it was also in the school of Political Science that the anticapitalist student association *Contrapoder* was created by Iglesias in 2006. In 2008, a group of researchers within that same school, including Iglesias, Errejón, Bescansa, Ariel Jerez, and Monedero founded the group *Promotora de Pensamiento Crítico* in order to debate Spanish politics and issues such as the transition to democracy. The political socialization and activism of this group of activists had consistently taken place in the ideological space of the radical-left, an environment in which different versions of Marxist social and political theory had prevailed. Sympathy with new Latin American popular movements had made members of this group well acquainted with populist politics, but it was Errejón who focused in depth in the analysis of populist politics and discourse. Within this group, he was also the one who showed a deeper interest in Laclau's theories of populism. In fact, with a few exceptions leftist political

activists in the Spanish academia were not well acquainted with Laclau's ideas, and tended to adhere to other streams of Marxist or post-Marxist political thought.

Errejón would play a crucial role within this group of activists in the theoretical diffusion of Laclau's theory on populism. Errejón himself narrates how his theoretical and political views were transformed by his study of popular movements in Latin America (Errejón and Mouffe 2015, 70-71). His first ideological steps were strongly influenced by autonomist Marxism and Gramsci, and his first militant commitments took place in anti-globalization movements (Errejón and Mouffe 2015, 72). However, contact with Latin American politics in 2006 changed his political views and led him to study and interpret popular discourses and movements (Errejón and Mouffe 2015, 73).²¹ Such ideological transformation was mostly absent from the texts written by other very prominent founders of Podemos. For instance, Luis Alegre, a lecturer of philosophy at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, who later became general secretary of the Madrid party branch of Podemos, defended his Ph.D. dissertation in 2008 on the concepts of class and citizenship in Karl Marx. No references to Laclau, Mouffe or the concept of populism were present in that text, a philosophical and theoretical exercise focusing on Marx's *Capital*. Iglesias defended his political science Ph.D. dissertation in 2008. The main theoretical frameworks on which this work was based were Wallerstein's world-systems theory and the Italian based stream of autonomist Marxism (Iglesias 2008, 168). Iglesias referred to Laclau's work on populism only when he pointed out that leaders play a critical role in the development of interpretative frameworks, even in the types of movements his

²¹ Errejón's analysis was not influenced by the works by Monedero, senior lecturer at the Universidad Complutense, on the politics of the Chavist revolution. No publication of Monedero's is quoted or referred to in Errejón's more than 600 page long dissertation.

work analyzed (Iglesias 2008, 112-113). Neither did other dissertations written by future members of the governing body of Podemos, the *Consejo Ciudadano*, (Gemma Ubasart's 2008 political science dissertation on emergency state responses to disruptive political action in Europe, and Eduardo Maura's 2011 philosophy dissertation on Walter Benjamin, both of these activists future members of Podemos) address or use theoretical frameworks focusing on populist phenomena or discourse.

The absence of a theoretical examination of populism is more striking in works that specifically addressed Latin American political experiences. Even essays praising Chavismo, like Fernández Liria and Alegre's *Comprender Venezuela* (2006), avoided the use of Laclau's theoretical framework and the defense of populism in the interpretation of the Bolivarian revolution. Fernández Liria and Alegre linked the Chavista movement to the emancipatory projects of enlightenment and Marxism, and claimed that the Bolivarian revolution was the most successful instance of the state of law in the Kantian tradition. Thus, the political interest and solidarity raised by the Bolivarian revolution among some leftist activists was not followed by interest in theoretically exploring or politically applying the discursive elements of Latin American populist movements nor, arguably, the populist discourse theory of one of its most influential thinkers, Ernesto Laclau.

Quite different in character was Errejón's political science dissertation on the construction of political and discursive hegemony in Bolivia during the first MAS government. Errejón's work dedicated its three main theoretical chapters to the construction of hegemony through political discourse, mostly drawing on Gramscian ideas that he interpreted, with some caveats, through Laclau and Mouffe's lenses (Errejón 2012, 227). Following Laclau and Mouffe, Errejón emphasized the contingent character of the construction of political discourses and identities, but also underscored, to some

extent in contrast to Laclau and Mouffe's ideas, the fact that such contingent processes were constrained by both socioeconomic structures and preexisting cultural elements and practices (Errejón 2012, 227-228). Errejón's work paid especial attention to the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the concept of "pueblo" through the constructed equivalence of multiple grievances and demands. Under conditions of state crisis, this political process could crystallize in the antagonistic constitution of a "pueblo," in opposition to both elites and the status quo (Errejón 2012, 233). Errejón's analysis identified several crucial steps in the construction of a hegemonic populist discourse: the characterization of the victims of injustice, the division of the political community into two poles, and the identification between the people and the general interest (Errejón 2012, 440). Populist discourse would involve a mythical and historicist reconstruction of the people, and it would also lead to simple and feasible solutions to national problems (Errejón 2012, 459-60).

As noted above these researchers were also strongly committed to political activism. And some of them produced texts aimed at political intervention in the midst of the economic and social crisis. These texts help identify the timing of incorporation of certain ideas in the emergence of Podemos, and in particular, the adoption of the "populist hypothesis" as the dominant ideational and strategic framework.

Populism was discussed in connection with the European radical right in an article published by Urbán in *Viento Sur* (a radical left magazine), in 2010. The article focused on the populist radical right and did not transcend the classical frame of Marxist theory. Urbán highlighted the main characteristics of the new populism in Europe and the emphasis on the antagonism between the people and the elite. But it did not consider the potential that populist discourses or ideas might have for transformative and radical politics in Spain. Interestingly, the following year Errejón published two articles in *Viento*

Sur on the subject of populism, the first one synthesizing his knowledge from Latin America, the second speculating on the prospects of populism in the Spanish case.²² Paradoxically, no debate on populism and its combination with left or right wing politics in Europe emerged then. Errejón's interpretation of populist movements would become three years later the intellectual basis of Podemos' alternative political project. In his two 2011 articles Errejón explored the meanings of populism, the limitations of the European left and the possibilities opened in Europe for different types of populist movements. For Errejón, the defining characteristic of populism was the antagonism between the people and the elites (2011a, 82-83). Both terms (the people and the elites) lacked any specific content, and were therefore open to new assignments of meaning by political actors (2011a, 82-83). The weakness of the European left resulted from its adoption of the liberal and pluralist creed and from its renunciation to political antagonism. In his view, emancipatory politics required the reenactment of intense political antagonisms through a morally loaded dichotomization of society. Errejón's analyses from 2011 did not offer a specific guideline for action. They pointed out some of the limitations that a leftist populist discourse would face in Spain. Critical among them was the fact that the multinational character of Spain had made it very difficult to use the concept of "pueblo" in an emancipatory way (2011b, 111). In fact, as Errejón pointed out in his 2015 debate with Mouffe, words and slogans had to be empirically tested and used on the basis of their mobilizing power (Errejón and Mouffe 2015, 126). Given the multinational character of Spanish society, the politicization of peripheral cultures, and the uses Francoism had

²² The editor of *Viento Sur* pointed out that Errejón's intentions were to follow up these two articles with a special issue on populism, but his proposal was not finally accepted (interview with Jaime Pastor).

made of the terms *nación* (nation) and *pueblo*, these words had to be discarded. Instead of them, the term *gente* (also people, but less politically loaded, and with pluralistic connotations), or the expression *gente de este país* (people of this country) had to be used, always in opposition to the privileged or the *casta* (the caste) (Errejón and Mouffe 2015, 126). In his 2015 debate with Mouffe, Errejón noted also the crucial role of passions and emotions, always acknowledging the masterful use that radical right movements made of these crucial elements of political action (Errejón and Mouffe 2015, 58-59, 61). Eventually Errejón's reconstruction of the populist discursive processes by virtue of which MAS had reached hegemony in Bolivia would serve as a map for the articulation of a populist discourse in Spain.

Between 2011 and 2012 Errejón was the main proponent of the "populist hypothesis." Iglesias has also pointed out that the innovative analyses and reflections developed by Errejón gave rise to new political perspectives and stimulated politically committed researchers in the Universidad Complutense to participate in public communication arenas in order to create a new ideological hegemony. In Iglesias's words,

This is a reflection that Íñigo Errejón started to develop from his experiences in Latin America, which has to do with the hypothesis of the role of the national-popular in order to construct big political aggregations... It was a very Gramscian discussion *that we both shared, but Errejón took it much further by applying the work of Ernesto Laclau* (Rivero 2015b: 96, our translation, emphasis added).²³

²³ In his 2015 New Left Review article Iglesias stated also that the "populist possibility was theorized most specifically by Errejón, drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau" (Iglesias 2015, 14).

The populist hypothesis was not initially shared by all the members of the core group of activists that became the founders of Podemos and, according to some former members of Izquierda Anticapitalista, it remained in a minority position among the rank and file of the new party.²⁴ Key figures in the initial founding process such as Monedero (who would abandon the direction of Podemos in April 2015) had also reservations about this project. And certainly, from a more radical perspective, members of Izquierda Anticapitalista also pressed in a different strategic direction since the party foundation.²⁵

However, the positions or power conquered by Iglesias and Errejón (as main candidate and electoral campaign chief respectively) allowed them to implement the populist hypothesis in the 2014 European elections. In particular, Errejón would become a key mobile carrier (Jacobs 2015: 51) in the process of adoption of a populist discourse by Podemos.²⁶ In cooperation with other social science scholars and activists, some of whom had previously participated in *Contrapoder*, they managed to tailor the discourse and slogans in a clearly populist direction. A reduced number of activists sharing a common political diagnosis prepared an electoral campaign aiming at the construction of new antagonistic categories.²⁷

²⁴ Interviews with Miguel Urbán and Jaime Pastor.

²⁵ Criticisms from the radical left pointed to the excessive importance assigned to discourse vis-à-vis socio-structural conditions (interviews with Miguel Urbán and Germán Cano).

²⁶ Errejón would continue to play a key role in Podemos as campaign chief for the 2015 and 2016 general elections, as responsible for the political secretariat of the party, and as speaker for the Podemos parliamentary group.

²⁷ Interview with Germán Cano. See also Giménez (2014a, 101, 105-106).

From the perspective of this group, the 2014 electoral results confirmed the validity of the populist hypothesis, always against the reservations and even hostility of the left (Giménez (2014a: 105). As Ínigo Errejón explained in a interview,

in politics we all have opinions...The only way to validate opinions is to test them and to see if they work. You can think you are entirely right, but if you do not prove it, you are not. And that is what we did (Giménez 2014a, 101; our translation).

The evidence presented above allows us to falsify rival hypotheses about the causes for the adoption of a populist discourse by Podemos. Populist discursive strategies did not arise out of a shared and/or preexisting populist political culture among radical left activists, nor out of the bottom-up demands of the 15M, even if this movement created very favorable conditions for the appeal of populism. Instead, populist elements resulted from the reflections and ideational transformations that took place among some social science political activists who would later be situated in key positions of authority and influence in the new party. Many radical left activists within Podemos continued to view populism with a combination of skepticism and mistrust. However, the roles played by Iglesias and Errejón in the 2014 European elections, the electoral success of the 2014 populist campaign, and, finally, the fact that Iglesias and Errejón became the two most important party authorities in the November 2014 party congress, decisively contributed to consolidate the prevalence of the propopulist group in Podemos.

Following standard practices in process-tracing studies (Bennett and Checkel 2015b; Waldner 2015), we present in Figure 12.1 a causal map of the main processes that led to the emergence of a populist discourse. In the first place, due to a combination of intellectual and political developments (the crisis of Marxist theory, the strength of Latin American populisms, and the influence of Laclau's discourse theory) some young

activists and social science scholars (first and foremost Errejón) adopted a pro-populist interpretation of radical political change. Key elements of this interpretation were developed and refined by Errejón, Iglesias and other close associates in their debates and seminars during the 2010-2013 period, no doubt stimulated by a conjuncture of deep political-economic crisis and widespread bottom-up social mobilization.

---Figure 12.1 about here---

The socioeconomic and political crisis stimulated as well radical left political activism challenging and the popularity of Iglesias. Of course, both the substantive political approach Iglesias chose to articulate (a result to a large extent of the ideational transformations experienced by the Complutense group) and his remarkable rhetorical skills contributed to Iglesias's popularity among significant sectors of the Spanish society. It is as a result of this combination of ideational changes, media influence, and radical left political entrepreneurship, that the foundation of Podemos took place. The leadership of Iglesias granted Errejón and a close group of associates a decisive role in the articulation of the campaign strategy and, ultimately, in the elaboration of new populist discourse. The success attained in the 2014 elections consolidated the leadership of Iglesias, the influence of Errejón, and, consequently, the power of the populist discourse framework, despite the persistence of political-ideological pluralism within Podemos.

Conclusion

As other pieces in this volume show (see Carlin et al's conclusion to this volume), the activation of populist attitudes requires a context of failed democratic representation. In this chapter we have emphasized the importance of the political and economic contexts in the rise of new populist ideas. Ultimately the choice of a populist discourse was favored

by a specific political-institutional conjuncture characterized by a Socialist economic policy switch, corruption scandals, and the 15M social mobilization. These circumstances created a context in which populist ideas became particularly appealing for significant sectors of the Spanish electorate. The selection of Iglesias as leading candidate and the appointment of Errejón as campaign chief in the European Parliament Elections granted pro-populist actors a decisive role in the electoral strategy of Podemos.

The understanding that populisms lack a systematic set of ideas still appears in many academic analyses. "They are about emotions and not about convictions," points out Delsol (2015, 66). By contrast, the results of our analysis are more consistent with the ideational and discursive interpretations of populism as a set of ideas (Hawkins 2010; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser in this volume) and as a thin ideology that associates itself to other "host ideologies" (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Furthermore, in the case of Podemos the process by which a group of political entrepreneurs adopted a populist discourse had a strongly deliberate character. What is remarkable about this case is the degree to which abstract thought, theoretical reflections, and comparative political analyses led to the adoption of a populist discourse.²⁸ The reception and adaptation of Laclau's discourse theory provided a group of political activists with an interpretive framework and a set of ideas ready to radically transform democratic politics. Certainly, the flows of political and personal communication linking Spain and Latin America facilitated the process of reinterpretation and innovative appropriation of Latin American populisms in Spain. But this change was also made possible by the crisis of Marxist social theory and radical left political actors. In the face of this crisis, an alternative program of radical, politically oriented social research, to

²⁸ This point is stressed also by Kioupkiolis (2016).

borrow Lakatos's terminology, became extraordinarily attractive to interpret the political scenario and performatively anticipate a populist situation. Intellectual reflections by Errejón first and by Iglesias and other activists later played a key role in this process. That is, in the case of Podemos, changes in the abstract and objective contents of thought aimed at overcoming a problem situation (Popper 1985, 58-59, 265-6) preceded the adoption of an innovative, populist discursive strategy.

There are interesting parallels between the process of theoretical transformation that led to the adoption of a populist discourse by Podemos and the reinterpretation of Marxism that Georges Sorel proposed at the beginning of the 20th century – even if the latter led to an even more radical departure from Marxism. In the case of Sorel, the perception of the theoretical failure and political weakness of economicist and determinist Marxism, in combination with the emergence of new ideas in social psychology and other social sciences, led to a new emphasis on the role of emotions and myths in politics. In Sorel's interpretation, the myths of the general strike and violence should lead to the generation of intense social antagonisms and to radical social transformations. As Sternhell points out (1995, 57), "not the scientific method, but 'social myths' would enable the existing difficulties of socialism to be overcome." In Sorel's theory, even Marx's *Capital* should be interpreted as an "apocalyptic text...created for the purpose of molding consciousness" with radical political goals (as quoted in Sternhell 1995, 56). In the case of Podemos, the perception of the crisis of Marxism and the political failure of the radical left led some activists to adopt a new theoretical framework aimed at generating new cultural understandings (myths, emotions, discursive mechanisms), intense social antagonisms, and politically winning coalitions. The electoral and political success of Podemos in 2014 and 2015 seemed to confirm the usefulness of the "populist hypothesis."

The widespread acceptance of populism as a useful mobilizing tool did not imply the demise of radical leftism within Podemos. In fact, for both internal and external, electoral reasons, the combination of left radicalism and populist discourse remained a key characteristic of the party. Despite their organizational and electoral success, populist positions remained just one of the ideological streams within Podemos. Moreover, Podemos faced different dilemmas regarding its ideological and electoral strategy that led to growing internal tensions from 2016 onwards. In the 2016 general elections Podemos built an electoral coalition with IU (Unidos Podemos) as an attempt to surpass the Socialist party. This electoral alliance failed in its objective of making Podemos the second most voted for party, and triggered a conflict between Iglesias, the main proponent of the leftist strategy, and Errejón who disputed the usefulness of the alliance with IU and favoured a populist transversal strategy.²⁹ Internal conflict reached its highest point in the February 2017 party congress, as Iglesias and Errejón competed for the control of the party by presenting alternative lists to the Consejo Ciudadano Estatal, the governing body of Podemos. This contest was settled by the clear victory of Iglesias and his group while Errejón lost his positions as political secretary and as speaker of Podemos in the Spanish parliament.³⁰ This outcome confirmed the strength of radical left positions among the

²⁹ In Errejón's words, "we are moving in a direction that prevents us from building a new majority" (<http://www.errejon.info/ha-habido-un-viraje-ideologico-que-nos-ha-alejado-de-la-idea-inicial-de-podemos/>). See also the political proposal of Errejón and his group in the 2017 Congress, which advocated leaving left-right labels behind and transcending the "unity of left" in favor of "the unity of the people" (Recuperar la Ilusión 2017: 17).

³⁰ The candidates endorsed by Iglesias attained almost 59.7% of the seats in the governing body of Podemos. Those favored by Errejón obtained 37.1% of the seats. The

activists of Podemos and the difficulties faced by the advocates of a transversal populist strategy. In a parallel way, the heterogeneous and distinctive character of radical left coalitions in several territories created serious strains for Podemos, which faced the challenge of balancing demands for self-determination and a patriotic project for the whole Spanish people.³¹ In both ideological and political-territorial respects, the dilemmas faced by Podemos showed that, despite their innovative potential, populist ideas had not managed to escape the constraining power of long term structures of political conflict in Spain.

anticapitalist group, despite attaining 13.8% of the votes, obtained 3% of the seats. Iglesias obtained 89% of the votes for the position of secretary general. See http://www.eldiario.es/politica/datos-cocina-votaciones-Podemos_0_612089572.html (accessed on February 15th, 2017).

³¹ The challenges posed by the multinational character of Spain for a populist project were already highlighted by Errejón (2011b). An illustration of the complex position of Podemos can be grasped in the fact that it endorses Catalan self-determination and opposes Catalan independence. The negative public impact of support for self-determination has been emphasized by Bescansa, one of the founders of Podemos. See http://www.eldiario.es/politica/Bescansa-Podemos-proyecto-politico-Espana_0_700979973.html (accessed on November 4th, 2017).

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Figure 12.1 Causal graph: ideational and sociopolitical changes in the emergence of a populist discourse (corresponding pieces of evidence are reported in parentheses).



ED: Errejón's dissertation (2006-12)
EVS: Errejón's articles in Viento Sur (2011)
INT: Interviews and testimonies
EED: European elections discourse (2014)