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Spanish state

Spanish State: A perfect storm in the PSOE federal committee

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Besieged from the outside, first by the 15M anti-austerity movement and then by Podemos, the final *coup de grÃ¢ce* to the social-democratic party PSOE came from the inside, as a reaction of fear by a fraction of its bureaucracy and ruling elite faced with its decline, a crisis of regime and the collapse of the previous political order. The checkmate of the removal of party leader Pedro Sanchez was a coup of fear and arrogance. The coup of a past that survives in the present in putrefied form. It is the fruit of the crisis that has gripped the PSOE since 2011. And at the same time, it has opened a new phase of this crisis acting as the precipitating factor of a dynamic of serious implosion. It is therefore simultaneously a result of the internal crisis and a cause of its worsening.

Reasons of state (governability in the name of financial power and faced with the "threat" of Catalan independence) clash, without those responsible knowing it, with the rationale of party, the fruit of the blindness of leaders who, accustomed to assimilate and to confuse, have not understood that their party no longer plays the systemic role it did previously, who have not realized that in the era of permanent austerity these rationales collide, inevitably pushing the social democrats to a brutal confrontation with their own social base. For a time state and party were the same thing for the PSOE. But that period is now behind us, so that saving both the political system and the party that was its principal plank is not possible.

Just as it is possible that corrupt politicians like Rita Barbera or Miguel Blesa genuinely do not understand why they are accused and why what they have done all their lives has now become a reason for scandal and reproach, Felipe Gonzalez and those around him assume that they can act as before, and push their party onto the path of self-immolation. Gonzalez and Diaz are to political strategy what Barbera or Blesa are to ethics. [1] Although, to tell the truth, they do not lag behind in that area either. The reason in both cases is the same: that 15M took place. [2] Anyone who has not assimilated this and has not been able to read its meaning wanders like a ghost through Spanish politics...at least on its left.

Gonzalez, Diaz and the entire faction behind the coup symbolize the worst of all possible PSOEes, as right-wing as it is authoritarian, as Spanish centralist as it is stale, as arrogant as it is outmoded. Anything more sinister is inconceivable. They embody a past which is reluctant to fade, that imprisons the present and darkens the future. They are the undead who zombify everything they touch, everything they bite. They are splinters of a dark and rotten past that terrorizes and pollutes the present with its legacy of pestilence.

Felipe Gonzalez, with his licence to conspire, represents a past that refuses to go away, and blocks the possibility of the PSOE developing a policy for the present to guarantee a future. "A miserable prisoner of the powerful" as he was masterfully defined by the former editor of *New Left Review*, Robin Blackburn, in the 1990s - an expression that Miguel Romero, founding editor of *Viento Sur*, rescued and reformulated some years ago as a "prisoner of power". A prisoner of power that became its slave, chained in the bowels of the state and osmosifying with it. Susana Diaz simply embodies a layer of leaders (in which reasons of state and party are mixed with personal ambitions) that has arrived three decades after its time, a kind of timeless and anachronistic repetition of the generation that won in 1982, but in a scenario in which their project already has no material bases for sustained success and lacks a narrative and political credibility. Deluded by their election victories in Andalusia, they forget that these are not transferable to the Spanish state as a whole and thus avoid any understanding of the historical decline of the PSOE.

(2) The PSOE has been shown to be the weakest link of bipartisanship. This is logical. 15M, despite its transversal nature and its break with fixed positions, in the first instance impacted on the people of the left. And the political-electoral channelling, which was not automatic or mechanical, of the great indignation expressed in the

squares in 2011, came through an option, Podemos, that also emanated from the left, despite having the intention, correctly, of going beyond it and the strategy, incorrectly, of doing so by issuing confusing messages and an increasingly empty project.

In the elections of 20 December 2015 and 26 June 2016, Sanchez was able to withstand the onslaught of Podemos and Unidos Podemos. Against all odds he resisted the *sorpasso* (electoral overtaking of the PSOE by Podemos) that would have condemned the PSOE to slide along a path never travelled and into a dead end. But, despite this, the party was seriously injured and pushed into a unique situation in which it was no longer an option of government, lacking the necessary votes because its social base contracted. But neither can it be an opposition party, because the crisis of bipartisanship, of which the crisis in the PSOE is the principal feature, prevents the traditional turn of alternation. Neither government nor opposition, the PSOE has ceased to perform its normal function and is torn between two possibilities that, for different reasons, collide with the vision it has of itself and with the role it has played from the Transition: first, becoming a complement of the rightist block, today the strongest bastion and guarantor of systemic stability in turbulent times; second, preserving at any cost its independence, at the expense of all the parliamentary instability that could generate, hoping that the social base of Unidos Podemos becomes partially discouraged over time and it will thus be able to reassert itself, in spite of everything, as the main electoral alternative to the right-wing Partido Popular (PP). The first option entails self-destruction in the medium term, caught between the wall of the PP and the onslaught of Unidos Podemos, while the second means prioritizing the interests of apparatus over governability, but without being able to offer a clear alternative to the PP in the short and medium term and therefore acting as a party without any functionality.

The substantive problem for the PSOE is that the only real option for being an alternative government in the here and now, forming an alternative majority with Unidos Podemos and Catalan, Galician and Valencian confluences (mostly the Catalans for reasons of parliamentary arithmetic), is impossible, unless Unidos Podemos reduces its demands to a derisory and self-destructive minimum. The problem of the PSOE is very simple: it has no alternative to austerity and cannot lead an anti-austerity government – despite part of its (declining) electoral appeal being attributable to appearing distinct from the right – since to do so would mean breaking with its *raison d'Être* and its historical function since the Transition.

Sanchez ruled out the first option for obvious reasons. It involved going to the stake for a not very heroic cause. His destiny was clear: to go down in history as the person who sank the PSOE and facilitated another Rajoy government, to fry for two or three years in Congress by directing a group of zombies abducted by Brussels and the PP, and to be removed without mercy just before the next election for another leader who was less grilled. A regrettable future, without doubt. Difficult to imagine a darker and more ridiculous political career.

He therefore tried to cling to the second option. Not to fall under the yoke of PP and to win time and more time. His plan was clear: (a) Seek a public negotiation to form a new government, (b) take soundings, even with little hope, as to whether a broken and internally weakened Podemos would be willing to lift him into the presidency in exchange for almost nothing, (c) to blame Unidos Podemos and Ciudadanos in the event of the failure of the negotiations, and (d) to risk going into a third election with a left and unitary profile in which he hoped not only to keep ahead of Unidos Podemos, but perhaps expand a little on his advantage. This would have paved the way for the medium term, because a bad result for Pablo Iglesias would only serve to increase the anger in Podemos and make its next Assembly, the long-awaited Vistalegre II, a meeting of high risk for the formation, which lacks a culture of real political debate or inclusive management of differences. Frankly, it was not a bad plan for a cornered apparatus, without any project other than survival.

Make no mistake. Sanchez did not embody any left wing in the party. In other words: Diaz and Gonzalez represented in crystalline form the right of the PSOE, but Sanchez did not personify the left, but simply a fraction of the PSOE that knew how to read the situation better and which does not live in an unreal fantasy world. This has been a battle within a right wing party overtaken by the time it has had to live through, against an apparatus without any project but

with desire, tenacity, and a true sense of how to survive. At least enough to understand that it is in the struggle with Unidos Podemos that the game lays. Paradoxically, Sánchez basically felt the same nostalgia for the PSOE that was and is no longer as Gonzalez and Diaz, the same longing for a regime that is now in crisis. But the two sectors differed in the answer to give to their own decadence.

(3) The crisis of the PSOE is another chapter, albeit with special characteristics, of the crisis of social democracy in Europe. The most visible manifestation of this is the drastic fall in electoral support, but this is the consequence of a crisis of identity, strategy and project, in the framework of a context of oligarchic attacks on democracy, involution and decomposition of the traditional mechanisms of political representation.

The coup shows crudely the nature of contemporary social democracy: the PSOE is no more than a party embedded in, and at the service of, economic and financial power, although with an electoral and to some extent an activist base, which in part identifies the left, in a context where to serve and to form part of the nucleus of economic-financial power is incompatible with the most minimal policies favourable to the interests of the bulk of society. The collision between social democracy and its own social base thus becomes inevitable.

The savage pro-capitalist management of the crisis by European social democracy thus culminates a long history of integration into capitalist political and economic structures, but in a context where there is no longer a material base to offer material progress or the illusion of such to their social base. In the 1980s, the PSOE implemented a capitalist modernization project firmly, conceived as a project of “progress”, a veritable recurrent historic fetish of the years of *felipismo* [3], whose objective and legitimizing narrative was abandoning the traditional backwardness of the country inherited from Francoism and becoming like other European countries, through a mixed ideology of parliamentary democracy, consumerism, economic growth, Atlanticism and cultural change. Around this, the PSOE articulated its national project and its own idea of Spain, with a rhetoric that combined in an unbalanced manner a defence of “plural Spain” with a strong pre-eminent Spanish nationalism.

The generalization of the consumerist model, social modernization and consolidation of a small welfare state, within a scenario of decomposition of the labour movement and growing de-politicization and individualization of social relations, gave a solid hegemony to the PSOE for a whole decade, connecting with the expectations of the urban middle class without losing the support of a majority of the working class. The Gonzalez era ended in 1996 because of the economic crisis of 1993 and the outbreak of serious corruption scandals, without forgetting the depoliticizing impact of the deep social transformations resulting from the capitalist modernization project itself that facilitated the shift to the right of segments of the middle and working class. The PSOE of Zapatero returned to power in 2004 with a policy proposal that emphasized a traditional progressive profile in the social and cultural fields, which largely served as an alibi in order to camouflage its lack of differentiation with the PP in the economic area. But this project ended up pulverized by the economic crisis and its acceptance of Euro-austerity in a second term that ended with the cry of “they do not represent us”. [4] In retrospect, the entire project of capitalistic modernization embraced by social democracy appears as an endless *fuite en avant* by way of a veritable strategic (and identity) bubble in which the social democrats linked their destiny to that of neoliberalism itself, in a kind of empty high risk Ponzi scheme.

(4) The consequences of the triumph of the coup fraction in the PSOE are still impossible to calculate. The design, implementation and content of the coup against Sanchez displayed an impressive harshness and coarseness, the best exemplification of what this party really is. It is rare for an organization to expose itself in this way.

The problems experienced on 20 December and 26 June will multiply exponentially after the dismissal of Sánchez. The electoral base of the PSOE, at its historic minimum, runs the risk of contracting much more, increasing its two major structural problems. First, the aging of their voters and the loss of connection, to the benefit especially of Podemos, with young and middle-aged voters. Second, the growing territorial and geographical disarticulation of its electoral support. Very much weakened in Catalonia, in the Basque Country and in Galicia (although to a lesser

extent there), and without a breakthrough in Madrid, it runs the risk of becoming a semi-regional party, in the broad sense, pivoting around Andalusia and Extremadura, and unable to embody a credible project for the state as a whole. A high-risk situation for a party that in the 1980s worked in permanent symbiosis with the specific idea of hegemony in what Spain then was.

The crisis in the PSOE immediately benefits the PP, which will finally be able to form a government and will continue to concentrate votes leaking from Ciudadanos. But in the medium term, the PSOE crisis represents a decisive blow to a bipartisanship that had already disappeared in its classic form on 20 December but without being yet replaced by a new party system. The implosion (beyond the final magnitude that it will take on) of the PSOE is the implosion of the political system and the governability of the Regime of 1978. And vice versa.

In a certain way the PSOE has put its own destiny in the hands of the PP. Although it is not easy to justify, if Rajoy acts exclusively by reason of short term party interests he could try to go toward a third election, which would leave him strengthened at the expense of the PSOE and Ciudadanos, but at the price of facilitating the *sorpasso* of Unidos Podemos, thus inflicting an accurate blow to the systemic *turnista* alternation. If, on the contrary, as is likely, he prioritizes reasons of state, he will not opt for a new election that would wreck his systemic rivals, but boost those who play outside the rules, Unidos Podemos. In this case he would "limit" himself to imposing draconian conditions on a PSOE without any negotiating capacity for its own self-sabotage.

The immediate future of the PSOE is very complicated. To go toward new elections under post-coup conditions would be tantamount to an imminent shipwreck imminent. Facilitating a Rajoy government would involve a political immolation and strong internal turmoil, and perhaps feed the expectations of a Sánchez attempting to reconquer the leadership (an option which, paradoxically, would be the only one that could in some measure bail the party out). Paving Rajoy's way toward the Moncloa [prime ministerial residence] implies not only an abstention. One way or another governability will have to be assured and the adoption of the whole package of measures, of "reforms", which the new government will carry out in obedience to Brussels, must be facilitated. Euro-adjustment policies have been half paralysed for two years: first, in 2015 when there was a need to give oxygen to Rajoy so as not to pummel him before the elections and propel Podemos; later, in 2016 by the interim in the Moncloa. But in 2017 the time lost will have to be made up. The machinery will be launched at full throttle. And the PSOE would be dragged by it, thus leaving the field of opposition free to Unidos Podemos. This is when the real effects of the coup against Sanchez will be felt.

The political processes are uncontrollable. Once put into motion they have their own unpredictable political dynamics beyond the control of their protagonists. They open cracks that can cause unexpected earthquakes in the short and the long term. Those who orchestrated the rebellion against Sanchez did so thinking they would save both the governability of the state and their party. But the effect achieved could be the contrary. Paradoxes nestle at the heart of political activity. And these days even more so: the strongest opponents of Unidos Podemos within the PSOE may have created the conditions for the *sorpasso* that the latter could not perform alone. Which, in other words means that, if under the baton of Felipe Gonzalez and Susana Diaz, the PSOE is on a one-way path to self-destruction, it may be that Gonzalez and his cronies end up making a sudden, unexpected and invaluable contribution to the forces of the rupture that they have rejected, feared and fought throughout their lives.

[1] Rita Barbera is former mayor of Valencia for the rightwing Partido Popular, she is accused of money-laundering; Miguel Blesa is a former banker accused of mis-selling. Susana Diaz is the PSOE president of the Andalusia region, Felipe Gonzalez was leader of the PSOE from 1974 to 1997.

[2] 15M is the shorthand name given to the mobilization of 15 May 2011 that marked the emergence of the Indignad@s movement.

[3] The years of leadership by Felipe Gonzalez.

[4] "They do not represent us" ws one of the main slogans of the 15M.