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Spanish state

Saving the PSOE

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A spectre is haunting the Spanish political system, the spectre of the collapse of the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español – Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) . A spectre which inspires fear in those at the top and hope in those at the bottom. As unimaginable as it is possible. As much wished for by some as feared by others.

After the European parliamentary elections of May 25 bipartisanship has been shaken by a veritable electoral fracking, whose cutting edge is Podemos, announcing an earthquake that is yet to come, a movement of electoral tectonic plates that threatens to devour a PSOE that, nevertheless, still has hydraulic engineers to cushion its fall.

The electoral fracking will be increased, and the tremors will cause vertigo for those who watch the world from the peaks. Each new electoral poll threatens a true nightmare for a PSOE torn by a continuous electoral draining. "At certain moments of their historical life, social groups separate from their traditional parties. This means that the traditional parties, with the form of organization they present, with the specific men who constitute, represent and lead them, are no longer recognized as a specific expression of their class or a fraction of it", wrote Antonio Gramsci in his "Notes on Machiavelli". Does that sound familiar? To see the ground open under one's feet is not a pleasant sensation. And still less for the customary masters of the world. The field of the possible has been opened of pair to pair. For good or bad. Of what is possible for us, but also what is possible for them. Of what we can do. Of what they can do to us.

The new Secretary General of the PSOE, Pedro Sanchez, has a mission: to save the party. An essential task for those who seek to keep Spain afloat. The PSOE is one of the two legs of the party of the Ibex 35. Without PSOE there is no bipartisanship. Without bipartisanship there is no regime. And today it is its weakest link. They will need a good deal of makeup and a facelift in order to obtain a credible new look (and not only towards the outside: the 15% vote for the candidate of Izquierda Socialista, Perez Tapias, shows an unexpected level of internal discontent in a party that has for a long time been anesthetized in relation to its rank and file). Primaries always go down well. A young candidate, also. But it will be enough? "Tore down a la Rimbaud, you know it's hard sometimes", sang Van Morrison. A phrase that must perfectly summarize the mood of the PSOE leaders behind the stony cardboard smiles, if they had not stopped reading Rimbaud years ago (and frankly the idea of "changing life" had always been very distant for them) to satisfy the *Financial Times* and the manuals of company management and very little else.

Walk the line

To save the PSOE is paradoxically as difficult as to sink it. Both tasks are herculean. Mission Impossible? Agreed, but which of the two? Who strives to refloat it faces an unknown reality. They have never suffered as much discredit as is presently the case. They had never faced an adversary as disconcerting and dangerous as Podemos, a true torpedo to its waterline. And whoever wishes to relegate the PSOE to the history books also faces an unprecedented task. A chance to see the eternal impossible dream realized.

To see the PSOE stagger is simultaneously beautiful and fascinating. Something you do not see every day. But the spectacle will not last eternally. Either it will end up straightening itself or it will fall. Yes, the PSOE can be restored. It is never necessary to underestimate it. Then our greatest dream would finish in the cruelest of the nightmares. It would evaporate as quickly as it arrived. To see the breach opened close, to see the existing possibilities vanish would be cruel. Yes, the PSOE can fall. Then the impossible would be feasible, the unimaginable would be real. A vertiginous and exciting future would be opened.

There are two strategic errors to avoid faced with the crisis of the PSOE. First, not to realize its historical magnitude and the opportunity that it provides. To thus resign, without so much as fighting. Or to be stuck in a combative but harmless minority. The goal of articulating an alternative with the intention of winning a majority must be precisely considered. Without generating false illusions, without promising rapid victories, but with the will to dare, to try, to set goals inconceivable until recently.

Second, it is necessary not to make the opposite mistake and declare it dead prematurely. The PSOE is holed, but it is not sunk. It has institutional resources, anchorages, clientelist networks, media abilities, links with the apparatus of the state and economic power. It has a long historical experience in reinventing itself and endless tentacles that allow it to continue. Saving the PSOE is the great challenge for reasons of state. The services provided to the country, from the Transition to austerity, via NATO and industrial reconversions, merit it. One does not easily abandon such a valiant soldier. And there are no rapid reliable replacements for such loyal servants. Better to conserve what exists than improvise.

Marching towards the dark side

The PSOE is a zombie, truly the walking dead, without soul or illusion, its heart both black and empty. But to kill a zombie, as we know, is not easy. They rise time and time again. Although the label of living dead quite suits the PSOE, in the end it is bad taste to compare it to a zombie. The poor zombies have not done anything. They are not guilty of labour reforms, privatizations, wholesale ideological renunciations, support for LOAPA, corruptions, GAL, Corcuera's laws, imperialist wars and innumerable other greatest hits of ignominious memory. The retrospective listing of the dark deeds of the PSOE makes an impression on anyone. One reason more for not giving it up for dead more. Its last gesture could be to resurge as a sinister phoenix of austerity.

Social democracy has taken a long march towards the dark side. Its savage pro-capitalist management of the crisis is thus the culmination of a long trajectory, sprinkled with discontinuities and points of inflexion, of integration in the capitalist political and economic structures. Founded at the end of the 19th century on bases whose statist nature Marx had already criticised in 1875 in his analysis of the program of the German Social Democratic party newly created in Gotha, social democracy would soon enter a linear gradualist drift, in a passive accumulation of forces towards an imaginary triumphal march towards socialism. Then would come the strategic and moral bankruptcy of the First World War, the subsequent crushing of the German revolution and the strategic inconsistencies faced with the ascent of fascism in the inter-war period.

After the Second World War it would have an important role in the consolidation of the welfare state alongside Christian Democracy. The congress of the German SPD in Bad Godesberg in 1959 symbolized the formal abandonment of the reformist perspective towards socialism in favour of the "mixed market economy". The passage was interrupted half way. If the congress of the French PS in Epinay in 1971 represented the opportunistic attempt of social democracy to capitalize on the spirit of 1968 and the hopes for social change engendered by that period, the 1980s were the years of progressive adaptation to the new neoliberal winds. After the failure of the brief Keynesian attempt of the first Mitterrand government in 1981, the social democratic governments of the south of Europe, in the hands of the Mediterranean Jackson Five of Papandreou, Gonzalez, Soares, Mitterrand and Craxi, had a decisive role in this turn. The Third Way of Tony Blair and Anthony Giddens or the "New Centre" of Gerhard Schröder in the 1990s marked another key point in this trajectory. Partly theoretical rationalization of what had already been done and partly a new leap forward in the assumption of capitalist values, the Third Way accelerated still more the open integration of neoliberal postulates. From there to permanent austerity was only one step further. Into another abyss.

Uncertainties

The future of the PSOE, and our chances of bringing it down, will depend on the outcome of the Catalan self-determination referendum this autumn, the municipal and regional elections of May 2015 and the general elections of November of that year. But this route has many possible outcomes. There are many crossroads and bifurcations along the way. Nothing is evident. Neither the sequence of the events nor its mutual relation. There are abundant possible combinations, many imaginable calendars. In Catalonia neither the outcome of the 9-N referendum, nor the reaction to its possible disavowal, nor the following steps are evident.

Rajoy, on the other hand, might be expected to bring the general elections forward to take advantage of the weakness of the PSOE and gamble everything on one card, to avoid the erosion of a loss of fortresses like Madrid or Valencia in the autonomous and municipal elections. But while advancing the elections could be good for the PP, it would be bad for bipartisanship and the regime if the PSOE does not recover. Reasons of state and the partisan interests of the PP would thus enter into collision. The results of early elections could be a blow to bipartisanship and place both parties in a situation where only a grand coalition guaranteed governability. A true suicide for the PSOE. A true suicide for even such a disciplined and loyal soldier and servant of financial power. Could we see the PP and PSOE agree to the survival of the bipartisanship by means of electoral reforms that guarantee majorities? It is always a possibility. But to do violence to the rules of the game so as to prolong it would only increase the loss of legitimacy of both parties. Such a measure would smack of desperation.

The political scene is unforeseeable. It is a very volatile situation. Only the present difficulty in reviving social struggles gives a breathing space to the forces of an exhausted regime. This is the crucial weakness from our point of view. We should not forget it.