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Spanish state

Ciudadanos, Podemos and the desired centrality

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV484 - May 2015 -

Publication date: Friday 8 May 2015

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The eruption of Ciudadanos has changed, once more, the fluid and volatile political landscape of the Spanish state. Finally the option of quiet change came, the regeneration of the model without changing it. Is Ciudadanos the Moriarty of Podemos? Its unexpected and invincible enemy? That is the hope of the Ibx 35 and all those who have endeavoured to promote the “Podemos of the right”.

Ciudadanos deprives Podemos of its novelty effect and, above all, its appearance as the only contender to the throne that bipartisanship has already semi-abandoned, around which a heterogeneous social majority could be built, attracted to Podemos by the real possibility that it was the vehicle for political change. It is a vicious circle, because as a victory for Podemos seems less possible, the less support it will receive. And, on the contrary, the more credible the victory of an alternative, the more instrumental support it will receive. Although both parties are vying for only a layer of votes and their major potential voters come from counter-posed sites, Ciudadanos blocks the growth of Podemos in the less politicized and more conservative sectors and fires a torpedo at the waterline of its project of a transversal party which aspires to quickly accumulate a social majority that goes beyond the traditional confines of the “people of the left”.

The rise of both parties has undoubted points in common, in particular as regards the media-television propulsion of the personal charismatic leadership of Rivera and Iglesias. But if the media projection of Podemos can be explained by a logic of index of audiences, that of Ciudadanos has been induced by business-political interests to consciously create the antidote to Podemos and an option of replacement or underpinning of bipartisanship. And, beyond the televisual parallels, there are two very different underlying realities. Through the Podemos phenomenon there has been a process of self-organization from below often in conflict with the development and structuring of the party itself, and real rank and file militancy, much of it from the recent experience of the 15M and the Mareas and the social sectors who had sympathized with them. None of this exists in Ciudadanos, devoid of activist base and social anchoring, despite the obvious pull of the actions and conferences of Rivera and his followers.

The rise of Ciudadanos, as reflected in that of Podemos, shows once more the crucial importance of the media, and television in particular, in the current crisis of bipartisanship and in the formation of new political alternatives. And, with this, it also shows the volatility of the situation, the weaknesses of the process of politicization underway, and the fragility of any strategy of social transformation that undervalues the importance of social self-organization and is restricted only or primarily to the field of communications.

To fight Ciudadanos, Podemos must be faithful to what motivated its foundation and the hopes hatched after the European elections, and avoid any temptation to imitate its new and unexpected rival. The search for “centre” voters, if it is conceived as an adaptation to their preferences and not as a struggle for changing perceptions of reality, re-signifying debates and resetting priorities, means beginning a path toward an unattainable carrot that there is always more to the right. The recent historical development of social democracy is quite eloquent. Their results also. The temptation of respectability to contest the votes of the depoliticized “centre” would be a strategic error. If the goal is to sell a superficial change, a mere empty regeneration, Rivera will always win and not Iglesias. There is no point in playing in a field where the candidate with a tie is always better than the one with a ponytail.

The eruption of Podemos was able to change the coordinates of the political debate, introducing new topics on the agenda and forcing the rest of the parties to adapt to the new player. The meteoric success of the term “caste” was, without doubt, the clearest example of this. It would be a fundamental error if now it was forced to play in the field of another, that of Ciudadanos, that of bland promises. On the contrary, today more than ever, we must insist on the need to unite democratic regeneration with a change in economic policies, together with criticism of the bipartisan

system and corruption with the defence of a citizen anti-austerity rescue plan. This is precisely the Achilles heel of Ciudadanos. How do citizens stop the evictions? What about privatization? Rescuing the banks? This is the type of question on which the party of Rivera should be challenged, to clearly show in that its proposals are more of the same. Here it moves poorly. Here Podemos can move well. If there is any aspiring “caste” in Spanish politics it is represented by Albert Rivera, whose tranquil change consists of little more than putting himself and his disciples in the place where the PP and PSOE have been for decades.

The challenge is for Podemos to continue to set the political agenda by placing proposals and issues on the table to highlight its uniqueness and its credibility as an agent of democratic and social change. Wanting to “be like them” has a bad history for any emancipator movement. To show that being different can be more efficient, better, relevant and solvent is the challenge for those who seek to fundamentally change the world.

The battle for centrality is, seen in this way, the fight to move the centre of gravity around which alliances and the social and institutional relations revolve in a direction favourable to those at the bottom (impossible to conceive of hegemony in the Gramscian sense without understanding it as an articulation turning around class relations!). In short, the battle to control the lever around which the political-social gears pivot. Difficult, without a doubt, but this conquest of the desired centrality, when not confused with programmatic and discursive adaptations, opens unexplored doors that allow us to bring what is possible closer to what is necessary.