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Spanish state

A midsummer's night's bewilderment

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Without doubt, we were expecting a better night. The Spanish state elections of June 26, 2016 definitively marked the end of the first stage of the political cycle opened with the eruption of Podemos in the European elections of May 25, 2014, which in turn was a product, not in a mechanical way, of the blast of May 2011. The results for Podemos were unprecedented in retrospective terms, but have been clearly below expectations and possibilities. Why it was not possible to make the much desired *sorpasso* (overtaking) of the PSOE? The fiasco took us and others by surprise. This is not to draw lessons after the event explaining a failure that no one saw coming, but if at least try to understand why it happened.

Some thoughts, therefore, hasty as they are and without having yet had a detailed analysis of electoral behaviour:

1. The view that Rajoy and the PP are the real and symbolic winners of the elections is unanimous. The traditional right has been shown to have a robust electoral grounding. The causes of this, beyond short-term issues, can be sought in substantial sociological trends, in the cultural field and in mutations in the social structure, after decades of neoliberal capitalism and consumerism and property speculation, without forgetting the weight of political clientelism in many regions. It should not be forgotten, however, that in terms of generations the electoral support to the PP is especially strong among the oldest layers, which shows its loss of contact with the younger population and poses a key problem for the future. The campaign of fear directed at Podemos by the right had an effect and allowed for a consistent mobilization of its electorate, much more than the reverse. The effect of Brexit, right in the final stretch of the campaign, presented in apocalyptic tone on the part of the media, undoubtedly reinforced a vote of order and fear. The capacity of the PP to concentrate "useful votes" on the right at the expense of Ciudadanos, on the other hand, shows that the "Podemos of the right" has been from the beginning a phenomenon much more superficial than real, without strong social roots and an active social base.

2. The PSOE, despite obtaining its worst result in history (22.66%, 5,424,709 votes and 85 seats against 22%, 5,545,315 and 90 seats at the December 20, 2015 elections), nevertheless avoided what could have been an irreversible catastrophe, what seemed an inevitable *sorpasso* by Unidos Podemos which would have placed it in an impossible situation. It has avoided a serious immediate internal crisis, but this does not hide the fundamental problem it faces: its absolute lack of an economic project differentiated from austerity and the right within the framework of the historic exhaustion of European social democracy. In a scenario where a majority is not necessary in order to be the first political force in the country, its lack of real project pushes it into a subaltern relationship to the PP and prevents any real discussion with Unidos Podemos. If the predicted new government under Rajoy is to work with the abstention of the PSOE, it will face the future dilemma of whether or not to support the new round of cuts and neoliberal reforms that Rajoy will undertake under the supervision of Brussels. If it does, the PSOE will pay a political price for this. And if it does not, the legislature will be politically unstable. The PSOE can withstand an electoral campaign against Unidos Podemos well enough, but it is not clear that it can succeed also in a daily parliamentary confrontation in a new legislature marked by cuts which it has to in some manner be partially "understanding" of for the sake of governance.

3. In the short term the scenario that seems most likely is a PP government facilitated by the abstentions of PSOE and Ciudadanos. The latter does not agree about new elections which might be lethal for it if a new batch of useful votes goes to the PP. The PSOE could face another electoral cycle with greater confidence, after having reaffirmed itself before Unidos Podemos, and perhaps its leadership would dare to go toward this horizon. But their party interests collide here with reasons of state which require a government rapidly in a scenario of European instability. There may be an internal tension, real or staged, between the party apparatus, less directly and organically linked to financial capital and more prone to put party interests first, and those sectors most closely interwoven with the

economic world and the state apparatus. But what is predictable, barring any surprise (and we live in a time of shocks), is that in the end the PSOE passively facilitates a Rajoy government, abstaining on the vote for a government. If this is its orientation, the most intelligent thing to do would be to previously renew its offer to Podemos of a “progressive” government including Ciudadanos, so as to claim that it has been forced to promote the PP into government because of the alleged intransigence of Unidos Podemos and through a sense of responsibility, to avoid new elections. Be that as it may, the PSOE needs to build a narrative and a staging of their decisions in a scenario it did not expect

4. Unid@s Podemos failed unexpectedly in its goal of overtaking the PSOE and challenging the PP for victory. The alliance between Podemos and Izquierda Unida obtained the same number of deputies as both had obtained separately (71, 69+2), but lost 1,100,000 votes (21.1% and 5,049,734 votes compared to 24.28% and 6,139,494 votes on December 20th). The causes are multiple and, admittedly, identifying them is a complex task. However, we should banish those interpretations that attribute the bad election results to the alliance between Podemos and IU, with the argument that this created an image of a radicalized “left front” that frightened moderate voters. Although it is not possible to make a counter-factual history the most reasonable thing is to imagine that, without such an alliance, the results for Podemos and IU would have been much worse. A first explanation of the unexpected fiasco can be found precisely in a very watered-down campaign, empty of real proposals and intended not to mobilize and stimulate the actual and potential social base of Unidos Podemos, but not to frighten voters who were more distant. The “patriotic campaign” was light in content, characterized by anachronistic references to social democracy, puzzling many and not seeming to raise the necessary emotion and mobilizing dynamic. A second explanation is to be found in the limits of the politicization aroused by the cycle opened in 2011 and in the fluency of a situation where the old loyalties are dissolved but the new have not crystallized irreversibly. Many who voted for Podemos and IU on December 20th may have stayed at home, voted for extra-parliamentary options or gone back to the PSOE. And all this for a number of contradictory reasons between “right” and “left”: apathy, in particular on the part of the electorate originating from IU, before a loose campaign, bewilderment at the “social democratic” and moderate turn by Iglesias, incomprehension at the refusal of Podemos to support Pedro Sanchez against the PP in the case of more moderate voters or a shift to a PSOE which appealed to the left before a patriotic Podemos by the more traditional left base. In sum, Podemos has opened an important political-electoral space that is here to stay, but not all of it is solidified and its peripheries are still unstably faithful and faithfully unstable.

5. Podemos has issued too many contradictory messages. Since its foundation, the voters have seen Podemos say and do one thing and its opposite. Left unity has been forcefully rejected and then agreed with IU, governing with the PSOE as a minority partner was ruled out and then a proposal of government was made, the label of “left” was rejected and finally embraced in a barely credible “social democratic” form. This generates a double problem. First, the multiplication of contradictory messages causes misunderstanding in the most diverse ends of its own electorate and, in the case of these elections, it is likely that Podemos generated confusion on “left” and “right” at the same time, with the combination of disengaged messages and barely articulated gestures. Second, the contradiction and the permanent change of message finally reinforced the perception that Podemos is a force of fickle principles that adapts its speech according to need. This not only affects Podemos as such, but also Iglesias in particular who, facing a scenario of permanent media harassment against himself, appears more as an excellent communicative robot programmed to convenience than as a leader with principles. Far from being a flaw only attributable to the tactic carried out in the last six months since the elections of December 20th, the problem of Podemos is of longstanding origin and it is the result of a political strategy based only on communicative techniques subordinate to opinion polls, not giving any centrality to its changing and fluid electoral program and policy proposals.

6. The transit from December 20th to June 26th was marked by the negotiations on forming a government and the coalition offer from Podemos to the PSOE. This contained one great success and two errors. It was wise to have an offensive attitude to the PSOE based on a unitary approach, something decisive if you want to overtake a force with which you are already tied.

A midsummer's night's bewilderment

No one ever had defied the PSOE with a unitary offer in this way. Proof of that was the internal turmoil in Pedro Sanchez's ranks after the assault from Podemos. However, the proposal had two important defects. First, the concrete proposal for the formation of a coalition government with the PSOE was a mistake. It would have been far better to offer an agreement to vote in a government as a basis for a programmatic agreement. The unitary effect would have been the same. And the hysterical reaction among the PSOE barons similar, since they could in no case tolerate a parliamentary agreement with Podemos involving opposition to austerity and a referendum on independence in Catalonia. In turn, an offer of investiture "to kick out the PP" would have enabled it to continue to mark its distance from the PSOE as a party of the regime and maintain consistency with what was said before December 20th.

The governmental proposal to the PSOE implied an unnecessary rehabilitation of the same as a party of change as well as a break with the "pro-regime forces and the caste vs. constituent and popular forces" axis which had functioned well, in favour of an uncritical and sudden recurrence to the left-right axis in its more superficial aspect, i.e. on the basis of relations with the PSOE as structuring element of that axis. The second problem is that, with the single exception of the referendum for Catalonia (put there in black and white thanks to En comÃn Podem), Podemos failed to articulate a concrete and concise list of measures on the basis of which to articulate a negotiation with the PSOE to make it clear that the latter is opposed to any serious anti-austerity measures and a constituent dynamic. Beyond an error of staging in the negotiation with the PSOE this showed a problem of substance in the policy of Podemos: the underestimation of program and the refusal to enter into clear and firm programmatic commitments. The communicative-discursive concept of politics has relegated program to an irrelevant matter with the purpose of always having hands free to permanently readjust what the party says and proposes. The result has been an inability to popularize demands that can become a lever for mobilizing the masses (such as payment in kind in the case of the platform of those affected by the mortgage crisis, the referendum in the sovereignty movement in Catalonia, or, in its day, the eight hours demand on the part of the labour movement). Precisely, to have concretized a project of "change" in clear "common sense" demands that the PSOE could not accept would have facilitated the public understanding of a refusal to support it in government and would have reduced the space for the demagoguery of Pedro Sanchez to present himself as an advocate of "change" who had been the victim of the sectarianism of Podemos. It is not self-evident that having averted these two errors would have had a positive impact on the electoral outcome, but at least avoiding them would have contributed to politically and strategically arming the Podemos social base.

7. The fiasco of June 26th is an expression of the limits of the model of the party understood as an "electoral war machine" built under the baton of Ã±igo ErrejÃn, after the founding assembly of Podemos in Vistalegre in October 2014 and which closed the door to any attempt at political/organizational experimentation in a democratic and innovatory sense and innovative channelling the legacy of 15M. Podemos was reconfigured as a party focused on electoral competition and political communication, and it completely neglected the organization and structuring of the rank and file activists below, as well as the work of social penetration and intervention in the social movements and trade unions. This has not contributed, precisely, to solidifying or rendering loyal its electoral base. The correlative at the organizational level to the electoral-communicative war machine was the adoption of a highly centralized and hierarchical structure in which the local and regional/national leaderships were very subordinate (materially and symbolically) to the central leadership, and in which the circles played no role and had no function. The majoritarian and plebiscitary method for the election of the internal bodies served only to exclude minorities, converting the instances of the party into an expression of the majority fraction everywhere rather than spaces of pluralist synthesis. The inability of some regional/national leaderships, politically weak and often appointed only on the basis of loyalty to the central leadership, often led to organizational-political paralysis. The result has been an organization with an inoperative and locked structure, plagued by recurring crises of the territorial Citizen's Councils, with very little dynamism at the base and with hardly any activity outside of the social networks and the electoral campaigns. Undoubtedly the non-pluralist "electoral war machine" model is not responsible for all the problems, but it contributed to aggravating them.

8. Faced with the limits of the "electoral war machine", ErrejÃn has announced several times the need to move toward a second stage of "popular movement". The main problem in the future promises of moving towards a

A midsummer's night's bewilderment

“popular movement” which does not exist today is that this is designed essentially in terms of cultural and social work complementary to the electoral process. The risk is of going from an (electoral and communicative) war machine to a popular movement, that re-balances electoral work with cultural work and implementation, but that does not serve to correct an electoralist conception of political-social change and allow the building of a less fickle base. We would then have an electoral war machine built on a passive and hierarchically structured social-cultural work turning on a political-electoral vortex. The result could be something not very different, but even more limited than the great reformist parties of the historical workers’ movement: a mass political organization (but in this case with the masses as potential audience and not as an organized force), complemented by a network of social and cultural associations... but without the trade unions (or any type of movement that replaces them) as a lever for mobilization. The weakness of this approach is that, between the electoral war machine and the people's movement understood in a socio-cultural sense, the role of social mobilization is conspicuous by its absence (not to mention self-organization).

It does not play a strategic role, beyond mobilizations internal to the popular movement (like the “march of change” of January 31, 2015). Although Podemos understood that 15M opened a new period and new possibilities, paradoxically it did not integrate the social struggle as a variable of its strategy, as if the dynamic of 15M was destined to last forever or could be replaced eternally by electoral marketing. The mobilizing and self-organizing thread that links the electoral and the cultural is lacking. The model of the party that would derive from this is no longer the “electoral war machine” centred on electoral campaigns and flanked by a network of cultural athenaeums, but rather a socially rooted “party-movement” oriented toward participation in the social struggles and the independent social movements, active in the cultural battle and not self-centred in institutional-electoral work (without this implying in any case underestimating the latter).

9. The political-electoral cycle initiated in 2014 has reached its peak and has given everything it could give. It has not been negligible. First, a drastic transformation of the party system and a crisis of the traditional system of governance in turn by the PP and PSOE, inasmuch as bipartisanship has been holed but not sunk. Second, the consolidation of an alternative force with five million votes, not far from the PSOE. And thirdly, the electoral victories in the municipalities of change on May 24, 2015 in Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Zaragoza, Cadiz, La Coruña and other cities. But the thrust of the political phase of the crisis opened after May 2014 has not been enough to take a force like Unidos Podemos into government. The challenge after June 26th is to open a second phase of the political crisis and, to do this, the determinant variable is the relaunching of the social struggle before the battery of adjustment measures that lies ahead. A new push is necessary for the completion of the path that still remains. The outcome of the battle on the social front will be decisive, although not in a mechanical manner, for the outcome of the general political struggle.

10. Podemos, even if it were to take a conventional structure, is not a conventional party. The parameters that the likely internal debate might take after the disappointment of June 26th are unpredictable, given the framework of a political structure which is highly centralized and hierarchical, an authoritarian political culture, and the lack of a tradition of real political discussion in the organization beyond the narrow leadership bodies. In this regard, the main challenge for the formation is to manage the debate on its future in a pluralistic, democratic manner, respectful of all positions. If it manages to do this, it will emerge strengthened and will be in better condition to oppose the new Rajoy government that will have to manage the next round of cuts demanded by Brussels and manage the new economic recession predicted by all international organisations. Then, maybe yes, we can start the real second round. The path toward social and political change is not a straight line, by way of a triumphal march along the (electoral) highway of history. It is full of setbacks, successes, slowdowns and accelerations. The question lies in understanding the difficult times in order to leave them quickly and prepare for the next round.