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Spanish state

Perspectives after the censure motion

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In mid-June 2017 the Spanish government, led by the right wing Popular Party (PP), supported by the centre right Ciudadanos party, survived a vote of censure brought against it by the anti-austerity Podemos party in the context of growing corruption scandals. The opposition Socialists (PSOE) abstained on the vote.

1/ Interesting in itself, the motion of censure also has the additional appeal of provoking an avalanche of diverse interpretations whose analysis is almost or as suggestive as itself. The manner of reading it and evaluating its consequences reveals a whole conception of politics. In his famous *18th Brumaire*, Marx called parliamentary cretinism the disease “which holds those infested by it fast in an imaginary world and robs them of all sense, all memory, all understanding of the rude external world”. Not only is parliamentary cretinism a way of acting politically, it is also a way of understanding and analysing it. And, certainly, *analytical cretinism* is a widespread specialty among political commentators who do not see beyond the corridors of the institutional world. Any serious analysis of the motion of censure, however, must scrutinize it in terms of its long-term impact and the strategic and tactical re-alignment of the forces of the left. Reducing the focus to the parliamentary arithmetic is too simplistic.

2/ What happened in the motion itself, during the parliamentary debate, was as could be expected: the representatives of Unidos Podemos played a good role. Iglesias’ authority, only threatened by his own oscillations and errors of register, is well-known. And he did not fail this time. Podemos parliamentary spokesperson Irene Montero perfectly demonstrated her own. The PSOE did what it could, but it still benefits, at least to some extent, from being in an interim phase in which Sanchez’s new leadership has not yet begun to find its feet. In this sense, the Podemos motion was more lethal to the PSOE when it was announced, putting Susana Diaz and the coup managers on the ropes, than when it finally developed. And the PP was dedicated to the only thing it can do: to be rooted in its own history and to maintain an unmoved course. The accumulation of cases of corruption and the shattering of its organization in Madrid have placed it in a difficult situation but, for the moment, it remains the best systemic support and the main guarantor that the political agenda of the great nuclei of economic and financial power is fulfilled. The lamentable and much commented on, performance of its spokesperson, Rafael Hernando, represents the perfect synthesis of the limitless authoritarianism and reaction that the PP embodies, and which begins to take on caricatural tones.

3/ The motion marks a milestone in the trajectory of Unidos Podemos which basically has two divergent ways to trace its future: either emphasizing a parliamentary closure above its activity, focusing its policy on permanent media coups and an endless dance with the PSOE, or trying to transcend the spaces of institutional politics to strengthen its presence in society and try to condition the parliamentary aspects from its intervention in this area. It is not a question of a Manichean opposition of “parliament” and “street”, but rather of defining how the two sides of political activity are related and where its centre of gravity is located. The challenge for Podemos is not to be reduced to a media apparatus and a parliamentary group that floats in the media-institutional space with nothing below, without solid anchorages in society beyond voting, social networks and mass media.

4/ 15M and “No nos representan”, and Podemos with its initial discourse against the “caste”, marked a moment of rejection of the whole political system and parties, although this answer always was, in particular in the Podemos moment, stronger in form than in content. But after the elections of December 20, 2015, the paradigm slid towards “bringing down the PP” and forming an alternative government. This was due in part to three unavoidable realities: fatigue with the resilient and endless government of the PP, the insertion of Podemos in the dynamics of parliamentary politics after its arrival in the institutions, and the decline of social struggles. The bottom line, however, is that the goal of getting rid of the PP can be focused from two points of view: in a perspective of constituent rupture and a break with the neoliberal model, or in a more conventional way of putting together a “progressive government”

with imprecise tasks. The latter has, unfortunately, been the option of Podemos since it embraced a policy of a unitary approach to the PSOE disconnected from concrete programmatic debate. The result has been both a dangerous express rehabilitation of the PSOE as an instrument of change, and in addition, since the return of Sánchez, the stagnation of Unidos Podemos in a public dispute with the PSOE without clear political content.

5/ The challenge for Podemos is having a tactic of unity towards the PSOE without generating the fiction and confusion of belonging to the same political space, and in which political-programmatic discussions occupy the decisive place. If Podemos seals its strategy around denouncing corruption and the need to set up an alternative government with uncertain content and a weak programme, basically this makes things easier for the PSOE. On the contrary, Podemos must fight to maintain and introduce into the political agenda the great debates on economic, social and energy policy. It is in this field that the big differences can be marked with the PP and the “new PSOE” of Sanchez can be forced to either assume concrete positions contrary to neoliberal logic, or admit to their imposture. If the framework of the debate is only corruption and democratic regeneration and a light programme, between the “new PSOE” and an Errejónized Podemos (albeit without Errejón) in imitation of Ciudadanos, the PSOE wins. This is particularly the case with a Podemos whose leader who is more credible in a contentious register than in the role of statesman. If the debate, however, remains in the realm of criticism of the model and the proposal of consistent alternatives, Podemos looks better than the PSOE. Unidos Podemos can do a lot to try to get things going one way or the other. But the decisive question will be the revitalization or otherwise of social struggles, and, in particular, the dialectic established between these struggles and Unidos Podemos, and the latter's ability to condition the political debate with programmatic proposals that emanate from, and reflect, the major themes of social conflict.

6/ Authority. This is the buzz word in the ranks of Unidos Podemos and its periphery on the way to appearing as an alternative government. A fundamental idea, no doubt, but it can be interpreted in different ways. It would be a mistake to equate “authority”, as unfortunately tends to happen, with governmental respectability according to conventional criteria and under the weight of the long historical phantasm of Eurocommunism. Authority in programmatic elaboration? Something fundamental without a doubt, but that does not necessarily have anything to do with decaffeinating the programme and cutting it in the pattern of what is acceptable by the “markets”, but with detailing thoroughly and deconstructing a battery of measures that point towards another model. Communicative and discursive authority? Of course. But this is not to seek the condescending approval of opinion makers and representatives of what is officially correct. It implies beginning by transmitting an image of honesty and conviction in what is said. There Corbyn is light years ahead of Iglesias, victim of his own innumerable discursive oscillations and sudden changes. Organizational authority? This of course involves dismantling the machinery built in the first Vistalegre and ratified, with a few touches, at the second. Authority, well understood, implies above all thinking strategically and, therefore, going beyond permanent tactics.

7/ Finally, the political debate over forming an alternative to the PP inevitably meets with the great destabilizing issue that is Catalonia and the process of independence. There the new PSOE has quickly grown old. Unidos Podemos has maintained a dignified democratic position regarding the referendum announced for 1 October although it has anti-strategically reduced its meaning. Its main weakness is the difficulty of integrating the Catalan process into a strategic state-wide perspective of rupture with the 1978 [post-Franco] regime. This is undoubtedly very difficult. Maybe impossible. Consequently, the Catalan question is still seen more as a “drag” to be overcome than as an issue compatible with a state-wide strategy.

Unfortunately, the position of the Catalan allies of Unidos Podemos, Catalonia in ComÃ³, does not serve in this sense to spur the articulation of a more audacious position. Its formalist passivity seems to have discarded any attempt at a federalist-independentist synthesis around the slogans of the Catalan Republic and a Catalan constituent process, and to have rejected the search for a complementary relationship between the unilateral path and the formation of state-level alliances. With this approach, the strategic debate, inside and outside of Catalonia, has lost depth in favour of superficialities that do not contribute to advancing at complex moments.

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