Interview

PABLO IGLESIAS

SPAIN ON EDGE

You've written about the intellectual influences shaping Podemos's approach, singling out the work of Laclau and Mouffe. There are three criticisms that could be made of them as strategic thinkers. First, unlike Gramsci's writings, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy *offers no analytical tools for grasping the tactics of the enemy—*La Casta*, or the liberal–conservative bloc of Centre Left and Centre Right. Second, their work has very little to say about capitalist dynamics, essentially treating the economic field as unproblematic—whereas the condition for the emergence of Podemos is the global economic crisis. Third, and again, unlike Gramsci,* Hegemony and Socialist Strategy *has much to say about discourse but little about deeds—the crystallization of a concrete minimum programme. To take the first question: elite strategy. In face of the incipient regime crisis, Spain's rulers seem to have adopted an active policy of neutralization—eliminating potentially aggravating factors, such as Juan Carlos, replaced by a fresher-faced Bourbon, and building up Ciudadanos as a 'clean' liberal party; a much more effective operation than To Potami in Greece. As you say, Podemos's space on TV has also narrowed. Have these developments altered the grounds for Podemos's triple hypothesis? Currently, all four parties—Podemos, Ciudadanos, PSOE, PP—are around 20 per cent, which makes a lib-con majority of 60 per cent, against an anti-austerity vote of 25 per cent for Podemos and Izquierda Unida combined.*

Clearly the adversary plays a role and the terms of the confrontation have been changing. It's true that the media terrain is much less comfortable for us now. Building up Ciudadanos was a smart move for them, not so much because it is taking votes from Podemos directly but because, at the level of discourse, it's challenging our position as the option for regeneration and our place in the media. Now there is another party of 'change', which has very different features; Ciudadanos essentially emerged from the liberal

establishment. So, yes, we are in the process of reformulating the Podemos hypothesis. Let me explain our thinking.

Our key objective was always to occupy the centrality of the political field, taking advantage of the incipient organic crisis. This has nothing to do with the political 'centre' of bourgeois discourse. Our challenge, in Gramscian terms, in this war of position was to create a new common sense that would allow us to occupy a transversal position, at the heart of the newly reformulated political spectrum. Right now, the political space that was up for grabs has been reduced as a result of these counter-moves by the establishment, including the promotion of Ciudadanos. So our task has become more difficult; it requires a new strategic intelligence. Also, these interventions by the adversary have created further contradictions within our field. We are facing three immediate difficulties.

The first is that this shift is relocating us on what we have considered from the beginning to be a losing axis—the traditional left–right axis. We believe that on that basis there is no possibility of change in Spain, and the risk we face now is being relocated precisely on that axis, as opposed to defining a new centrality that, to repeat, has nothing to do with the centre of the political spectrum. The second risk, or challenge, is that within this new landscape Podemos's plebeian discourse—articulated in terms of 'those below' against 'those above', the oligarchs—may be reinterpreted as the traditional discourse of the far left; as a result Podemos risks losing its transversal appeal and the possibility of occupying the new centrality. The third challenge, which is also a potential tool, is that of normalization. We no longer appear as the outsiders; the element of novelty is being diluted. But at the same time Podemos is now stronger, with more experience and a greater capacity for representation. And we face the huge challenge ahead of being able to retune, or refine, our discourse in order to parry those counter-movements and reopen the space that is now being closed down. Those are the challenges in the coming months. They are going to be tough ones for us.

A concrete example of this is the complex scenario we've had today [15 April] with the visit of the King of Spain to the European Parliament. This confronts us with a difficult issue: the monarchy. Why difficult? Because it immediately takes us out of the centrality of the field. Basically there are two options. The first, traditionally taken by the left—Izquierda

Unida, for example—is to say: 'We are republicans. We do not accept the monarchy, so we will not go to the reception for the King of Spain; we do not recognize this space of legitimacy for the head of state.' That—even if it's an ethically and morally virtuous position, which we can recognize and acknowledge—immediately puts one in the space of the radical left, in a very traditional framework, and straightaway alienates large sectors of the population who, no matter what they think about other issues, and despite their identifying the previous King with the corruption of the old regime, feel sympathetic towards this new one. The monarchy is one of the most highly valued institutions in Spain, so that immediately antagonizes social sectors that are fundamental for political change. So, two options: one, we don't go to the reception and stay trapped within the traditional framework of the far left, in which there is very little possibility for political action. Or, two, we go, and then Podemos appears surrounded by the parties of 'the Caste', respecting the institutional framework—as traitors, or monarchists, or whatever.

So what did we do, in this uncomfortable, contradictory scenario? We went, with our usual aesthetic—casual dress and so forth, disregarding their protocol; it's a small thing, but it's symbolically representative of the kind of things Podemos does. And I gave the King a present of the DVDs of *Game of Thrones*, proposing it as an interpretive tool for understanding what is going on in Spain. Our aim is to dance within this contradiction, within these positionings, with an ironic message that is at the same time a plebeian gesture—and which is so far working very well in the media, by the way—that allows us to shift the axis of the discussion: not monarchy versus republic, a discourse immediately interpreted in terms of the heritage of the Spanish Civil War, which unfortunately is a losing frame in the battle for social interpretation. Instead we try to say that it's a problem of democracy: citizens should, and must, have the right to elect their head of state. On the other hand, we don't want to look like just another institutional party, supporting the monarchy. Thus the plebeian and ironic gesture that allows Podemos to play with transversality, despite the risks it entails. Of course, this is a complex position to maintain, but it is the only one that can at least allow the political game to remain open—that can enable Podemos to play within those contradictions and not be marginalized in a position that is pure but at the same time powerless, in order to challenge and question the status quo.

Well, one could simply have better things to do than attend a reception for the King of Spain. But how exactly was the message that the people should elect their head of state conveyed by the gift of Game of Thrones*?*

One concrete way of translating that message is to say that what is at stake in *Game of Thrones* is a regime crisis, in that the image of the king is not a consolidated institutional figure but a fragile one, which is constantly being put into question and can change at any time. I told the King: 'This could be useful for you in understanding what is going on in Spain.' This is a very aggressive message: 'In the game of politics, you may in future stop being the head of state, because that is how politics works.' It is an ironic and indirect way of saying that for us, in a democracy, all options are possible. Avoiding a losing frame, and reconverting that frame in a way for people to perceive what we did as: 'Pablo Iglesias has dared to speak to the monarch using an unimaginable tone for a traditional political leader'. So, in this ironic gesture, what is implicit in this case but has been openly said in many others, especially in the moment of the abdication of King Juan Carlos, is that all options are available in democracy, that nothing should be taken for granted, and that actually the gesture, in that very institutionalized space that is neutered for political action, the possibility of telling the monarch—who is a monarch, not elected—that all options are on the table, and that a citizen can actually express that will, is itself a subversive gesture.

Obviously, there's another reading of Game of Thrones*: as a formulaic combination of mildly sadistic soft porn and blood-soaked pseudo-mediaeval warfare, interspersed with occasional moments of ersatz grand strategy. But to move on to the second point of critique of* Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the problem of the economic crisis and Podemos's minimum economic programme. You've spoken in the past about a debt audit, opening the books, which seems an essential first step. What distinguishes Podemos from Ciudadanos, as well as from the* PSOE *and* PP*, is that you are anti-austerity. How will you crystallize that as a programme, in the reformulation of the Podemos hypothesis?*

It is true that there is a big transition between *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and *On Populist Reason*, but even if I'd feel more comfortable in the frame of the earlier book, I acknowledge that Laclau is very honest in recognizing a problem that Gramscians, and especially

neo-Gramscians, have in explaining or tackling the relations between structure and superstructure. *On Populist Reason* solves that problem by departing clearly from Marxism, let's say, bypassing the whole problem. I wouldn't identify theoretically with that, but I would acknowledge that in *On Populist Reason*, Laclau proposes a very useful tool, or a very useful theoretical mechanism, for a practical interpretation of the autonomy of politics. It is absolutely true that there would have been no regime crisis without a financial crisis, in Spain as in other places. But a classic problem for Marxists has been precisely to interpret, or even understand, what the mediating mechanisms between economic crisis and political crisis might be. The left–right distinction and left–right conceptual tools pose huge problems for the interpretation of the political space that is now opening in a country like Spain.

The current situation is in some ways comparable to that of the 1930s. In the 1930s, there seemed to be two options in face of the economic crisis, and the political crises to which it gave birth, which manifested itself differently in different places. One was fascism, as a strategy for the reconstruction of the order of the dominant classes. The other, the Communist option, was that of the Popular Front: the defence of bourgeois democracy as a transitional or strategic option, in order to achieve eventually socialist ends. The comparison would be that today, the option of a socialist strategy, or a Marxist critique of neoliberalism, poses immense problems in the practical, political sense—to articulate an actual opposition that could have even the option of countering the current state of affairs. So the strategy we have followed is to articulate a discourse on the recovery of sovereignty, on social rights, even human rights, in a European framework. Even if this involves immense contradictions and ambiguities, it's proved in a certain sense at least to be able to articulate a social and political movement that can stand up to the regime, in the context of an absolute victory of neoliberalism and a lack of traction of Marxist critiques. In that sense it's a viable strategy to be adopted for this arena.

Those ambiguities and contradictions are related to something that we openly acknowledge: we are not opposing a strategy for a transition to socialism, but we are being more modest and adopting a neo-Keynesian approach, like the European left, calling for higher investment, securing social rights and redistribution. That puts us on a difficult terrain,

open to the standard criticisms of neo-Keynesian claims. For the same reasons, we prefer to talk about 'the Caste', privileged elites who have hijacked the power from the people. In Spain, at least, it seems that strategically this has been the only way to create something that wasn't there. It's true that this choice of the middle ground generates ambiguities, at least, till we reach control of the state and the institutions—because there are two moments: this moment, the strategic moment, so to speak, and then the moment of the state; the one is inseparable from the other.

But if we may push you a bit on this: in Spain, the public debt is really private-sector banking debt, which the state has taken on. The Zapatero and Rajoy governments have forced through a re-write of the Constitution to accommodate Merkel's demands for a 'debt brake', and torn up the labour laws, as the price for the €100bn Eurozone bail-out of Spain's private banking sector. The billions to the banks are being balanced by cuts to pensions, nursery schools, hospitals, state education, public-sector jobs and wages. Behind the PP, PSOE and 'the Caste' stands the German-led bloc of Eurozone powers and institutions, enforcing these austerity policies, and behind them stand the US Treasury and Wall Street. Spain has so far been treated more gently than Greece; Berlin's—morally despicable—singling out of the Greeks for vilification and punishment was politically well calculated. But the question is, what concrete measures will Podemos enforce to shift the balance against the financial sector, in favour of the mass of the people?

Let's start with Greece. Our Greek comrades have developed a similar strategy, in some sense, in a very different context. This strategy has two basic elements. The first is Syriza's attempt to reconstruct its own government's institutionality, which had been completely undermined and destroyed—for example, through creating the basic conditions for a tax reform that allows the state some margin for action, for public policies to repair the social fabric and reconstruct links that have been destroyed by austerity. The second element is Syriza's foreign-policy strategy, aiming to generate contradictions in the hegemonic bloc of the Eurogroup. There were timid attempts, especially at the beginning, at a criticism of the way Germany was handling the whole situation, and it was clear that the hope was to create a fissure in the dominant consensus.

Our strategy would be different, because it would start from the acknowledgement that Spain constitutes 13 per cent of the Eurozone's GDP,

whereas Greece makes up between 3 and 4 per cent. We would take as our point of departure the fact that our margin for action would be bigger. Of course, we would pose the same question about fiscal reform, to increase public spending on investment and social policies, including pensions, and ending wage depreciation to help increase consumption. Only from that position, having secured the ground, would we then be able to pose the question of the debt at a European level, within the basic framework of, for example, a debt restructuring linked to economic growth in the domestic economies—on the basis that only a strategy at the European level, which could create contradictions within the adversary, and especially within the social-democratic forces, would be able to pose the possibility of a real alternative paradigm to austerity policies, which at the moment doesn't exist. We're well aware of the immense resistance this would encounter, first of all within the apparatus of our own state, and then of course in the Eurogroup. But if such a small, weak country as Greece has been able to become such a huge factor of instability within the Eurozone, our capacity to create contradictions of that sort—among social-democratic, if not popular forces—would be that much greater. They would understand that the European project is not compatible with austerity policies, and that would open up a political space on the question of the economy.

Were you surprised by Berlin's hard line against Greece—demanding that Syriza be seen to cut pensions, before any money for the creditors will be released?

I was not surprised, for two reasons. One, because even if Greece is a weak state, it's a state that is openly challenging and putting into question the model of EU governance under German hegemony—so the challenge does not correspond to the size of the country. The second reason is that Podemos is now a player, too—a challenger in the fourth largest economy in the Eurozone. Our Greek comrades told us that the fact that we were so high in the polls was not necessarily a good thing for them, because any results achieved by the Syriza government would be seen as a boost for Podemos—a shot of oxygen for us. So now their aim is not simply to counter the efforts of the Greek government, but to close down the possibility of other contenders, like us. To pressure Syriza is to pressure Podemos, too—to show that there is no alternative. This is the constant refrain in Spain: 'You want to vote Podemos? Look at what's going on in Greece.'

From our point of view, Tsipras has been very smart in trying to create this image of an isolated Germany whose interests, even in foreign policy, do not necessarily correspond to those of Europe as a whole. That's what he's been trying to do with France and Italy, with limited success, but also in his eastern policy—to make visible the fact that Germany's interests are not necessarily the same as the European Union's. These visits were an intelligent way of suggesting that there may be new European states for whom that alliance with Germany is not so beneficial. So it's not surprising that Germany is such a tough negotiator.

To return to Spain. One political peculiarity there is the national question. The wealthiest, most advanced capitalist centres, Catalonia and the Basque Country, are, because of the national question, divided from the bourgeoisie in Madrid, so there is a uniquely weakened Spanish bourgeoisie as a whole. What opportunities does this create in terms of cracks in the regime?

The national question is probably the most important unfinished business of the 78 Regime, which managed to provide at least temporary solutions, in terms of discourse and in practice, to many of the problems inherited from the Franco dictatorship, including the social question—the Moncloa Pacts were the Regime's way of closing those open wounds. But it left the national question, which—especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country, to a lesser extent in Galicia—has been bleeding openly ever since, with no permanent solution. This has been an incessant contradiction within the 78 settlement. In the last few years, the conflict in the Basque Country has lost some of its centrality, which was essential to the regime, because of the ceasefire and then the abandonment of the struggle by ETA—though there are still between 400 and 500 prisoners being held in gaols hundreds of miles from their families. It's still a tragic political problem. But as the Basque question was losing centrality, the Catalan question became more and more prominent. Up till the emergence of Podemos in 2014, Catalonia was the most visible and the most fully articulated aspect of the regime crisis, provoking openly contradictory interventions from within the ruling bloc, as when the Constitutional Court struck down the revised Statute of Autonomy that Zapatero had agreed with the Catalan authorities, which ignited a feeling of outrage in Catalonia.

That was an extraordinary ruling. What was the explanation—politics?

Yes, probably. Zapatero knew he had won the 2004 election thanks to Catalonia. And since that 2010 decision of the Constitutional Court, which helped to sink the Socialist Party politically in Catalonia, the PSOE has never won a majority of votes in a general election. They need two regions in order to be a hegemonic force—Andalusia and Catalonia—and Zapatero must have been aware of the fact that, without Catalonia, it would be impossible to achieve that again. That's probably why he wanted to make a gesture of supporting greater Catalan autonomy, giving more leeway to that process—something that the right simply wouldn't accept. It was a bad blow for the PSOE, which is now struggling to maintain its presence as a national party, having become a marginal force in Catalonia. The Constitutional Court's decision, and the way the Socialist Party backed down in front of it, was a deadly blow in terms of the PSOE ever winning a general election again. That's why Catalonia is so important to us.

It is true that the Catalan challenge to the 78 Regime lost at least some of its centrality with the emergence of Podemos, because we put the social question, rather than the national question, at the forefront of our challenge to the regime. When I went to Catalonia for the first time, I took a hard line against right-wing nationalism there, suggesting that this was the same as Spanish right-wing nationalism. I made it clear that we support the sovereign right to decide, but also that sovereignty means public schools and hospitals, not the process led by the right-wing elites. This provoked very aggressive reactions from left-wing *independentistas* in Catalonia, calling us *lerrouxistas*—basically progressives who, in the end, are Spanish nationalists. What I've tried to argue again and again is that the social question is at the centre of the regime crisis, and the national question cannot be understood or solved without it. This probably explains our success in the polls in Catalonia. It's a curious phenomenon that, in the general election, we could become the first political force in Catalonia—that says a lot about what's going on there: Podemos would actually be in a better position to open up a democratic process which could lead to a solution to this problem. This is a difficult issue for us, because within Podemos there co-exist very different sensibilities—even in Catalonia, between federalists, who would

like to have a different relationship with Spain, and *independentistas*. Our general line is that the only solution would be a constituent process in which the national-territorial question can be discussed together with the fundamental conditions of public life. But we know that would require a level of support that's hard to imagine right now.

May we take you up on what you were saying about the 78 Regime? In Disputar la Democracia *you provided a wonderful excoriation of the Regime and its chief pillars—the monarchy, the Moncloa Pacts, the Constitution, the gerrymandered electoral districts, the two-party system,* NATO *and so forth—with Juan Carlos as the most detested monarch since Alfonso the Thirteenth. What you are saying here sounds quite comfortable with the Transition and the Moncloa Pacts, with only the national question left unresolved?*

I wasn't saying that it was right; I was saying it was a success. Our political and historical critique of the Transition has always been in contradiction with the undeniable fact of its social success, with the exception of the national question. We can unmask the logic of this agreement from above between the Francoist elites and the new economic and political elites—the impunity, and so forth—but we still face the problem that there is huge social support for that process, even today. The benign public image of the monarchy is an example of this. It means that the crisis of the regime is not framed in terms of a critique of the post-Franco transition; we can't even make use of the analysis of the Transition that we've been doing for years to explain what is going on. What we do is put the neoliberal management of the economic system at the centre of our explanation of the crisis. We have to admit that the crisis has nothing to do with the Transition, but with the neoliberal management of Spanish politics. That is, the disaffection with the political regime is not related to a historical memory of what happened during the Transition, but to completely new ingredients. This forces us to recognize something truly sad, which is that the crisis in Spain cannot be interpreted in a left–right key, as I did with the post-Franco Transition in my book. Consequently, when we criticize the parties of the regime, the PP and the PSOE, we cannot use the left-wing analysis that I made of the Transition; we have to use the new ingredients brought to us by the 15-M movement—the *indignados*—which also reveal the historical and ideological defeat of the left in the last 35 years in Spain. That is, the discourse, or the reasoning, that I deployed

to explain the Transition in *Disputar la Democracia* is not useful for a political discourse of the present.

But it's very striking that a lot of people in Spain are talking about the 1975–78 Transition and the crisis of the 78 Regime. To put the question another way: why was it that the 15-M movement focused on political questions, on 'real democracy', when what seemed to be at stake was the economic crisis?

It is very hard, in a movement of politicization of a crisis, to visualize an enemy that is not concrete. Only a few people with a high level of political and theoretical imagination would be able to say that the problem is capitalism. If we imagine a social movement of hundreds of thousands, it's difficult to imagine that a word like 'capitalism' would be able to embody what that movement is against—it is only logical to point towards the elites as the concrete personification of the crisis. It's normal for it to happen like that. Podemos has been saying that the power of finance is at the origin of a system of governance that we call corruption—a system in which those who exert power are not those who run for election. This was the political intuition of the movement of the squares from the beginning. It built on the idea of 'them' as an indistinct unity of economic and political elites which was not, of course, based on a very refined historical-materialist analysis, but was a logical political interpretation, and it had a lot of traction in terms of getting people out onto the squares and clearly identifying those who were responsible for the current state of affairs.

The composition of these movements was very important—the prevalent sectors were the impoverished middle classes. The squares weren't organized or hegemonized by the organizations of the working class, but by those sectors that were precisely the most devoid of collective political or corporative representation. This of course chimes with what Laclau was saying: it's hard to imagine the emergence of such a movement in a political space with a strongly articulated left and labour organizations. Only in the barren wasteland that the neoliberal right had created in Spain, by destroying all the social spaces associated with the left, could such a movement have traction. If we look at the regions, 15-M was very strong in places like Madrid and Valencia, where twenty-five years of PP hegemony had destroyed the public institutions, but weaker in the Basque Country and in the parts of Catalonia where the left and the

unions are strong—where there was an alternative political culture to interpret and organize the response.

Was 15-M not strong in Catalonia?

Barcelona—not Catalonia. They are not the same thing.

Did 15-M surprise you?

Absolutely. On our TV show just a few weeks before, we were discussing the Arab revolts, drawing the rather pessimistic conclusion that the economic crisis was creating political agitation and social movements in other geopolitical spaces, but not in Spain. As I've said, the 15-M movement held up a mirror to the Spanish left and showed that the traditional left parties had had nothing to do with the emergence of these movements, that their leaders had immense difficulty in understanding what was going on. Some of them even reacted in anger—old leaders saying: 'I've been an *indignado* for thirty years! Where were you before?'—thinking that the protesters were joining an already established political space, not understanding that this was a new movement that was precisely a revelation of their failure to articulate such a thing.

What was the sociological basis of the 15-M movement? Reports at the time suggested the key layer was the educated but semi-proletarianized service-sector middle class—archetypically, young graduates working in call centres.

There is no precise sociological study of the composition of the movement that I am aware of, and it is very difficult to establish such a profile. But as a political scientist, I would say that's the general tendency—young workers in sectors with no strong union presence, identified in a very Laclauian manner with a plebeian or subaltern position, deriving from the fact that they were brought up believing in a social identity based on high consumption levels during the long real-estate bubble, and after the crisis were thrown into a position of social vulnerability and weakness. Despite the social complexity of 15-M's composition, these impoverished middle classes are the most representative social layers. The movement went far beyond the earlier general strikes against austerity, led by the organized public-service workers and the industrial working class. In the 15-M movement of the squares it was plain that

those plebeian sections of Spanish society felt very uncomfortable with the symbols of the left, especially in the first days. The Republican flag created a lot of discomfort—this is something that we didn't understand at first. But it was enough to spend just a short time in the squares to understand that the social composition was very different from the general strikes, which had quite another political culture.

Was there a generational difference too?

15-M was a mixture, but predominantly very young people.

What was really impressive after 15-M were the Mareas*, the 'tides' or 'waves' of spontaneous organization against the Eurozone austerity measures: the anti-eviction movement, the hospital workers, the teachers and so on. What was the extent of that around Spain?*

One of the richest legacies of the 15-M, in a process of very rapid political accumulation, was this culture of mobilization, which offered the social movements a certain way of acting. The Mareas probably numbered fewer people than the 15-M, but their methods proved much more effective. There were three main movements: the anti-eviction network, PAH [Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, platform for mortgage victims]; the Marea Blanca movement, in defence of the health service; and the Marea Verde, in defence of the public-education system. They've all developed a tremendous capacity for speaking to concrete policy issues, a very clear and precise form of public discourse. Another important historical function is that the Mareas offered a training ground, a school for political cadres. Many of those who acquired an experience of leadership there came to join Podemos; the party's leading ranks are largely filled by people from the social movements. It was a natural outcome: the 15-M movement politicized civil society, then followed this process of activist formation, and that led to taking the next step, of giving the movement a political and electoral expression.

On the formation of Podemos: why did you choose that terrible name, with its echoes of the US Democrats' lame campaign slogan?

It's a good name! It comes from the mass movement—*Sí se puede!* is the slogan of PAH, the anti-eviction movement. In Spanish, Podemos works

really well. It was used by two Latin American parties before Obama took it up, in Bolivia and Venezuela, one on the left, one on the right. And the first black president of the US is quite popular in Spain. It's been taken up by marketing companies—they've tested it and found it very successful. You see it on all sorts of hoardings, which does us no harm at all.

On the mainstream parties' handling of the crisis: it was the PSOE under Zapatero who initiated the austerity programme?

Yes, in 2011. Zapatero was probably the Socialist president who went farthest on civil-rights reforms and even on foreign policy, especially in relation to the United States—pulling Spanish troops out of Iraq, albeit then sending them to Afghanistan. From the start he was fairly timid on social issues. But there was a turning point in September 2011: the agreement with the People's Party to change the Constitution's Article 135, introducing a cap on state deficits at national, regional and municipal levels. That was the moment that crystallized the effective Grand Coalition and made it apparent to everyone. It has had the same devastating effect on the Socialist Party as it has on all the former European social-democratic parties, from Blair's Third Way to Schröder's Agenda 2010. It proved that it was impossible for this new version of social liberalism to maintain its appearance as a government alternative under the austerity paradigm. Without questioning that paradigm, the space had simply collapsed for the project of social democracy as an alternative.

Even when they try to get out of that discursive trap, they are facing untenable contradictions. So, for instance, a practical example: the other day I met a group called Economists Against the Crisis. Its composition is quite heterogeneous, but it's mostly composed of economists who are close to the Socialist Party. They've put together a common-sense economic programme, which they were hoping the whole left, from PSOE to Podemos, could unite around. I read the programme and told them: 'If this is the platform, I can deal with the Socialist Party right away—we can go into government tomorrow.' But I know very well it would be absolutely impossible for the PSOE to implement that programme. There are many people, even among the PSOE's economists, who understand that the austerity paradigm is unworkable, but the party itself cannot get out of that model.

The PSOE presided for years over an economic model based on the inflation of real-estate and credit bubbles. Don't they bear the primary responsibility for its crash?

Absolutely. But the irony is that the Socialist Party created the material conditions for an economic model of governance that allows for the hegemony of the People's Party. Despite having to manage the fall-out of the crisis since 2011, the PP has proved more resilient to the consequences of the failed economic model. All the polls—with the exception of Andalusia, which is a special case—show that the PP is doing better. The PSOE created the conditions for their alleged adversary to succeed.

How would you map the geography of austerity in Spain?

First there's the vertical geography of inequality, which is immediately apparent in Spain's cities. In Madrid, there are differences of up to seven years in life expectancy between different neighbourhoods—the same gap as between Spain and Mexico, *within* the capital city. It's also reproduced between regions—there are vast differences between living standards in Andalusia and Extremadura as compared to the Basque Country, for instance. In Valencia, the PP has had a policy of combining massive spending on big infrastructural projects—sporting events and palaces, built mostly through corruption—while children in the public schools are studying in pre-fabricated structures, without heating, and the debt per capita is one of the highest in Europe. It's a perfect image of the model of governance of the neoliberal right.

And Asturias?

Asturias is a fascinating political space, not only because of its history, and its mythical status for the tradition of the left, but because of the complexity of its social relations. It is home to the last remnants of the industrial system—they do still exist—but also to a social composition that is a perfect example of the changes we've been pointing towards. Asturias is one of the places where the political culture manifested in the squares was strongest, and it is no coincidence that it is one of the places—probably *the* place—where Podemos is best organized. The regional government is currently run by the Socialist Party, with external support from the left—not in coalition. It's very complex. The traditional workers' organizations, especially the unions, are

still strong there, but at the same time these new political cultures of organization probably have more traction and implantation there than almost anywhere else. It was the region where Podemos got the highest percentages in the May 2014 European elections, when we had no structure there at all, and the polls suggest we should do well there in the upcoming elections.

What about Aragon?

Aragon is a much more traditional landscape, in political terms. There is a big difference, even a contradiction, between the politics of Zaragoza, the capital, where there is a huge concentration of the population, and the rest of the region. Zaragoza has had a Socialist mayor for a long time, whereas the rest of Aragon has its own dynamics, with a regionalist party with very particular characteristics. Normally it would be surprising for Podemos to do well there, but our leading candidate is Pablo Echenique, the scientist, much admired for his courage, who has a unique public profile and transversal appeal. The political landscape is changing so fast, it's difficult to predict the effects of the transformation. But it could be one of the scenarios.

And the two Castilles?

Traditionally, the voting pattern in both Castilla-La Mancha and Castilla y León has been an almost perfect representation of bipartisanship in Spain—a pure two-party system: the gains of one were the losses of the other. Castilla-La Mancha has always been a deeply conservative region, though it's had Socialist presidents whose virtue, so to say, was to be able to capture the conservative vote.

What the Americans call Blue Dogs?

Exactly. But since 2011 the Secretary-General of the PP, Dolores de Cospedal, has been president of Castilla-La Mancha. So the question is whether Podemos will be able to challenge this two-party logic; the effects of such a rupture are difficult to foresee. This is what they call Castilla *profunda*, the core of conservative Spain. The whole region is systematically underpopulated, due to contradictions in the development model. Unlike Italy, for instance, where there are many medium-size towns, in Spain there is a huge concentration of population in a few big

cities, and then vast sub-populated areas like the Castillas. Historically the communications and transport network has been highly centralized, exacerbating this uneven development. Another factor is that the two Castillas were among the chief recipients of European development funds, and since these have dropped off they've been badly affected. Unemployment is very high.

The distribution of the costs of the crisis has been very unequal, with several different factors—coastal housing bubbles, corrupt infrastructure splurges, high structural unemployment—mapping onto the underlying models of what David Harvey would call uneven geographical development. Regions like Andalusia, Extremadura and, a somewhat different case, the Canary Islands, which are deeply dependent on the tourist industry, have paid the highest price. Murcia has been badly scarred; its agricultural model was based on the influx of cheap labour from places like Ecuador and North Africa, so there are many immigrant workers. Now unemployment is very high and there have been many evictions—the direct-action movement against evictions in Murcia was really, really important because of the situation of the immigrant population in that region. So it's a very complex crisis with different facets; the situation is particularly dramatic in those regions where it hit the hardest. Those are the elements—tourism, industry, agriculture; and in between, basically, everything suffered.

The Basque Country seems to have been less affected?

The Basque Country not only has the highest levels of growth and economic progress in Spain, but also—surprisingly for many—the most advanced social policies. There have been experiments with basic income, subsidies for housing and transport; policies which have been broadly redistributive and have created, not an island of prosperity, but certainly the region with the highest levels of both prosperity and social equality. Paradoxically, the predominant political force there for the past thirty-five years has been the conservative-Catholic Basque Nationalist Party; it's indissociable from the evolution of the national question there. Yet there have also been historic compromises with the left. But even when a PSOE–PP Grand Coalition took over there briefly in 2009, after they'd banned the *abertzale*—Basque left-nationalist—parties from the institutions, they didn't alter these egalitarian policies. The city of Vitoria, which has the highest living standard in Spain, has had a People's Party

mayor for the last thirty years, and they are very socially advanced. I think it has to do with the region, the trade unions and the culture—the cooperative system, Mondragón—and so on.

How is Podemos doing there? You said there was no 15-M in the Basque Country.

It's surprising, even for us, but Podemos is now an important political force in the Basque Country, including Navarra, where the polls put us either first or second. It's hard to pin down the exact reason, because we take votes from many sources in the Basque Country—from the Socialist Party, from leftist organizations, from nationalists and other political parties or ideologies. But Podemos is present in all the regions of Spain, and not weaker in Catalonia, the Basque Country or Galicia. In fact, in Galicia Podemos is riding high in the polls. In the 2014 European elections we didn't campaign in the Basque Country, but we got exactly the same results as in the other regions, even though there are more political parties to vote for there.

How will Podemos determine its coalition policies after the 24 May regional and municipal elections?

It's first of all a strategic problem for us, because our main goal—we've been very clear about this—is the general election in November. So every decision and every situation needs to be analysed in the light of what position it would put us in for the upcoming general election. At the same time, though, there is a widespread political will for change, and that implies a situation where one needs to take on that role. There's the question of numbers, of course, but behind those numbers there is the question of what capacity one has to put pressure on others. When they ask us, 'Will you make agreements with the Socialist Party?', we always reply, 'The Socialists will have to make a 180-degree turn'. We know that inside the PSOE there are two basic tendencies. The first is a systemic logic, or a regime logic, which understands that the main priority is to stop us, to halt this movement—for them, that would translate into a grand coalition with the People's Party or with Ciudadanos. The second is a party logic, which knows that such a trajectory would cause the implosion of the PSOE—and would give Podemos room to thrive. So, it will depend on the numbers, it will depend on our analysis of the situations, taking into account our ability to exploit these contradictions in

our opponents' field in a productive manner—especially if, as the polls suggest, we are moving towards a four-party system, with percentages between 15 and 25 per cent.

And where will the decisions be taken? In Andalusia Teresa Rodríguez, the regional Podemos leader, seems to be in charge of negotiations.

In Andalusia, it's not a matter of coalitions for forming governments—it is simply that in order to allow, or not to block, the inauguration of a PSOE regional government, we have put three conditions on the table. First, we are demanding the resignation of two former presidents of Andalusia who are suspected of corruption—one is in the National Congress and the other in the Senate. Second, that the Andalusian government sign no contracts with any financial entities that are making evictions without offering an alternative home to the families. And third, a reduction in the number of high-ranking assistants, in order to allow the re-admission of all the staff in schools and hospitals who were dismissed during the crisis. This is not a programme for government: these are simply three conditions in order not to oppose the inauguration, because we don't have the numbers that the Socialist Party has; our margin is very restricted. What we are trying to do is to make sure that every form of institutional support by Podemos—even in negative terms, such as not blocking the new government's inauguration—needs to be translated immediately into social measures that can indicate the viability of change. But I think it's going to be very difficult to reach an agreement in Andalusia before the other autonomous elections take place in Spain. The Socialist Party is making it difficult for us. All these measures have a cost of zero. They don't imply a single cent of further public spending.

So who has the ultimate power to decide on questions such as coalition policy?

The current negotiations in Andalusia are led by the regional direction of the party there, as they will be in other places. But one of the agreements at our founding Constituent Assembly was that all such strategic decisions need to be taken in relation to our main goal, the national elections. So there needs to be agreement between all the different instances of the organization; the same will apply in the other regions, as well. In the case of actually forming coalitions, the Podemos Constituent Assembly agreed that, before entering any government, there needs to be a vote of Podemos members to approve or not.

Of all the members in that region?

Yes—so it's at the scale of the government, or the election: municipal, regional, national. But anybody can vote—registration is open.

How are Podemos candidates chosen?

Open primaries through online voting—anybody can run, they just need to have the approval of one of the local or sectoral Podemos Circles, and all the members vote. In the 24 May elections we're experimenting with a new scenario: running candidates who have no media profile, whereas one of the characteristics of Podemos up to now is that our leaders have been very visible in the mediasphere. So this will be the first test for the brand, so to speak, of Podemos: working with candidates who come from civil society, who have very solid professional profiles, for instance, but no public exposure so far. So we will see how much traction the—well, 'brand' is a horrible word, but you understand the sense—we will see how much force it has, when the candidates are not famous.

So, unlike in most political parties, the selection of candidates is to some extent out of your hands—you don't know who they'll be?

There have been no big surprises. Systematically, the primaries have produced candidates who already had an active profile and had been working very hard within the different structures of Podemos, so the method has been pretty honest in its results. The fact that we don't know who some of our candidates or our cadres are is because we are such a young organization, growing so fast that our structures have simply multiplied, and of course there are people everywhere that we didn't know before. But almost always they are people who were bred into Podemos and have played an active role. There's no randomness about it—no big surprises. They've come up through the same experiences as us. They are Podemos.